From the Ground Up: Beyond Gender Theory in Archaeology

Proceedings of the Fifth Gender and Archaeology Conference
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, October 1998

Edited by
Nancy L. Wicker and Bettina Arnold

BAR International Series 812
1999
3. The Aegean Landscape and the Body: A New Interpretation of the Thera Frescoes

Paul Rehak

Fresco paintings from the late Bronze Age Aegean world provide a rich source of information about the prehistoric cultures of Minoan Crete, the Mycenaean mainland, and the Cycladic Islands (Immerwahr 1990). Since 1967, excavations at the buried town of Akrotiri on Thera have provided an unparalleled opportunity for archaeologists to attempt a detailed reconstruction of an ancient society by examining the buildings at the site and their contents (Doumas 1983; Marinatos 1984). Although continuing excavation and restoration will surely modify our view of Akrotiri, the publication of several structures is already well underway and some preliminary observations can be made. I would like to focus attention here on some aspects of the fresco program of Xeste 3, a large free-standing public building of approximately thirty rooms, constructed on at least two levels (Doumas 1992, 127-131; Palyvou 1990) (Fig. 1). Most discussions of the Xeste 3 paintings, however, have minimized the gender issues raised by the paintings or have employed traditional masculinist methodologies of art historical and archaeological analysis and interpretation to interpret the scenes either as religious or as purely decorative, like wallpaper (for various opinions, see e.g., Hägg 1985; Marinatos 1983; Niemeier 1992; Kontorl-Papadopoulos 1996; Rehak 1997). In this paper, I would like to attempt a more balanced reading by analyzing the representations of the human figure in landscape as social documents (see also Rehak and Snihurowich 1997).

Many of the frescoes from the building make repeated visual references to crocus sativus, a cultivar whose bulbs need to be replanted on a six- to seven-year-cycle (Amigues 1988). These plants blossom in October after just a few days, when their yellow-orange stigmas are harvested by hand and dried for use. In the Thera frescoes, the artists have taken certain liberties. The stigmas are painted red, the color they take when dried, and the crocuses originally had brilliant purple petals which have faded or turned gray; therefore, we must now use our imagination to reconstruct the vivid, glowing colors on the walls in their original state.

The visitor to the building first saw a freeze in ground floor room 4 that depicts a rocky landscape with swallows, their nests, and young, along with blue monkeys or African vervets that wield swords and scabbards or hold gold lyres (Doumas 1992, pls. 95-99; Rehak, forthcoming 1) (Fig. 2). These blue monkeys are exotic creatures, imported from Egypt to Crete and thence to other islands like Thera as part of extended trade networks (Parker 1997; Strasser 1997). Thus, their presence immediately signals that the visitor has entered a liminal, supernatural zone and suggests that the iconography of the scenes may reflect close contacts with Minoan art. Both on Crete and in Egypt, blue monkeys are often associated with women and female sexuality. While we tend to think of swords as male implements, they were symbols of status and authority on Crete and many were dedicated as votive objects in Minoan caves. A contemporary sealstone from the palace at Knossos on Crete even shows a matronly woman holding a similar sword and scabbard (Fig. 3).

The adjacent ground floor room 3 has been subdivided into compartments by pier and door partitions, a Minoan architectural feature that allowed the selective opening and closing of areas within a room. One painted compartment is a sunken "lustral basin," so-called although we do not know its exact purpose, approached by a short descending flight of steps (Marinatos and Hägg 1986; Nordfeldt 1987). The basin is painted on two walls with a Minoan-style shrine facade surmounted by horns covered with red streaks (Marinatos 1984, 75 fig. 33; D’Agata 1992; Gesell, forthcoming) and a composition of three women in a rocky landscape that includes crocuses (Doumas 1992, pls. 100-108) (Fig. 4). Another painted compartment is a small, closet-shaped space with four male figures.

Recent work on body morphology, scale, costume, jewelry, and pose allows us to analyze the human figures (Lee, forthcoming; Tzeltanoutou 1982; 1984; 1988; Marinatos 1987b; Withee 1992; Rehak 1996; 1999; Younger 1992; Effinger 1996). In the lustral basin scene, the "Necklace Swinger" and seated "Wounded Woman" have similar coiffures of long hair, firm chins, shallow breasts, and ankle-length skirts that indicate that they are fully pubescent and sexually mature, about 14-16 years of age (Doumas 1992, pls. 101, 105). The "Veiled Girl" to right is in early pubescence, age 12-14: we cannot see her chest because she extends her arms in front of her body, but her short, calf-length skirt and partially shaved head with a few long locks indicate that she is not yet an adult. A shared groundline and physical proximity link the Wounded Woman and Veiled Girl in the area before the shrine facade; the Necklace Swinger stands apart at a lower level, as if approaching the sanctuary with an offering of jewelry.

Both the Wounded Woman and Veiled Girl have attributes that are presently unique in the iconography of Aegean wall painting. The former wears hairpins with floral finials and a draped but united apron with lappets that somewhat recalls a hula skirt (Doumas 1992, pls. 105, 106). Similar garments have been connected by Elizabeth Barber to the prehistoric "string skirt" used to advertise sexual maturity and readiness for marriage in some European societies (Barber 1994, 42-70). In Iliad Book 14, the goddess Hera borrows such a garment from Aphrodite when she sets out to seduce Zeus on Mt. Ida.

Blood streams from the foot of the Wounded Woman over a single, large crocus blossom. Since this blossom is not attached to a plant and simply hangs in space as a sign or symbol (Potts 1996, 18), the juxtaposition of blood and flower could be a metaphor for several types of female bleeding, including menstruation, the rupture of the hymen, or childbirth—all female rites of passage that followed one another in quick succession in most ancient societies (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Demand 1994; Dowden 1989;
King 1983; Knight 1991; Sissa 1990). Because no man or infant appears in the scene, a literal representation of the last two possibilities can be excluded in favor of the first.

The Veiled Girl averts her eyes from this bloodshed, although her red-spotted yellow drapery suggests that she too is undergoing a transition (Doumas 1992, pls. 107, 108). Saffron-dyed yellow costumes in historical Greece included the wedding veil and the garment called the krokoteia, which takes its name from the crocus used to produce the dye. The krokoteia was worn by prepubescent girls who served as Artemis at the sanctuary of Brauron, east of Athens, in preparation for their assumption of adult roles and duties (Cole 1984).

Despite the differences among them, the lustral basin women share a common link: all three have costumes embroidered or woven with crocus. The Necklace Swinger and Veiled Girl have blouses decorated with blossoms and stigmas, while the Wounded Woman’s unusual belt carries a repeating pattern of crocus buds (Rehak, forthcoming 2).

A nearby ground floor compartment depicts four male figures who are shown against a blank background, without landscape features (Doumas 1987, 1992, pls. 109–111) (Fig. 5). Their body types and facial features indicate that they are shown at four distinct age grades: a prepubescent boy (8–10 years of age), a lad in early pubescence (10–12), a young man in full pubescence (16–18) and a mature man with a slight paunch. Only one individual is clothed—and none wears jewelry, indicating that all are of relatively low status, particularly when we compare them to the richly adorned women from the building. Nevertheless, the adult male is seated, an unusual pose for either gender in Aegean art (Rehak 1995). Each male figure holds a metal vessel or piece of fabric; the gold cup held by the youngest boy unfortunately has been erased. The orange-yellow skin color of this youngest boy differs from the older males who have red skins; I shall return to this anomaly later.

In room 3 on the upper floor, in an area corresponding to the lustral basin below, a composition covering two walls depicts young girls gathering crocus blossoms in a mountainous landscape and offering them in baskets to an apparent goddess enthroned on a high platform set atop incurbed bases (Doumas 1992, pls. 116–130) (Fig. 6). Because the girls wear short skirts and have snub noses, receding chins, partially shaved heads, and flat chests with barely budding nipples, they must be prepubescent, about 8–10 years of age.

Slight variations exist among the girls in terms of hairstyle, though physiognomy suggests that they are close to one another in age. One, whose head has only recently been shaved, has short stubble that has just started to grow (Doumas 1992, pls. 120–121). Two others at a slightly more advanced stage of hair growth have short curls which are emphasized by lines incised into the plaster of the wall (Doumas 1992, pls. 118–119, 130). The fourth wears short curls that are starting to merge into a fluffy mass (Doumas 1992, pls. 123–124); eventually these will become long locks like those of the Necklace Swinger and the Wounded Woman in the lustral basin scene.

The goddess is richly dressed, coiffed, and bejeweled (Doumas 1992, pls. 122, 125, 126). She wears a crocus blossom over one ear. Her supernatural status is signaled by the heraldic animals that flank her, another blue monkey who presents crocus stigmas (Marinatos 1987a) and a leashed griffin with a red collar. The seated woman is thus a Mistress of Animals or Potnia Theron, an impression heightened by the presence of a nature scene on the adjoining wall (Vlachopoulos 1998). But her shallow breast and facial features are so similar to those of the Necklace Swinger and Wounded Woman from the lower floor that all three individuals must be the about the same age, 14–16 years old (Fig. 7). The relative youth of this divinity and her association with young girls strongly reinforces the connections of the historical Artemis, who protected women of all ages but especially young girls (Burkert 1985, 149–152). As if to emphasize the close relationship between the girls and goddess, all wear a forehead band which no other woman in Xeste 3 possesses.

An opposite wall of this room shows a file of mature women with full breasts and hair tied in kerchiefs or snoods, reminiscent of the woman on the Cretan sealstone mentioned above (Doumas 1992, pls. 132–134). Most carry different bouquets of flowers, and one holds a basket like those of the flower-picking girls opposite. Like the goddess, the woman with the basket also wears a crocus blossom over one ear, perhaps signaling a special relationship between them or indicating that the matron had served as a flower-picker in her youth (Fig. 8).

How are we to interpret this wealth of pictorial data from Xeste 3? Previously, scholars have focused on the economic importance of gathering saffron for a food and dyes (Amingues 1988), or have identified the pictorial program of the building as a general representation of puberty rites (Marinatos 1993, 203–209, 211). I believe that a more nuanced reading is possible and that the images bear significantly on our attempts to reconstruct this prehistoric island society. While Aegean art generally shows men and women in sexually segregated groups, it seems noteworthy that all of our diagnostic visual criteria: pose, costume, hairstyle, and jewelry, call attention to the role of women—particularly younger women—as protagonists within the building. At the same time, these features are used to call attention to the existence of four parallel age grades for both men and women. For women, these are particularly clearly marked: pubescence (coinciding with a period of service to a goddess), early pubescence, full pubescence (the Necklace Swinger and Wounded Woman), and matronly status (the processional women, who are least elaborately adorned—note their lack of gold earrings).

A stage of early pubescence represented by the Veiled Girl in the lustral basin seems to indicate the existence of a separate, different course open to some girls as they mature: she continues to shave parts of her head long after the prepubescent girls from the upper floor have started growing theirs in short curls, and she veils herself and averts her eyes from the bloodshed associated with full pubescence and lacks the long coiffure signaling physical maturity. She is thus different, "other," and perhaps—like the mythological Iphigenia—destined for the status of virgin priestess.

At the same time, references to saffron crocus abound for all of these women, whatever their age and status within this sisterhood. These are so pervasive as to suggest that this flower carries a specific meaning or meanings. In fact, a wide range of uses for saffron is known or suggested in the medical pharmacopoeia, past and present, from around the world: it can reportedly be used as a eupetia, stimulant, aromatic,
aphrodisiac, emmenagogue, abortifacient, and narcotic; in high doses, it is said to cause insanity and death though no clinical documentation known to me supports this claim. Its scientifically recorded properties have been largely ignored but may be significant.

In an article published some years ago, Ellen Davis called attention to an unusual detail in the way the eyes of some figures in Xeste 3 were depicted (Davis 1986). Several individuals have dilute blue streaks in the corners of the corneas, which Davis interpreted as a sign of relative youth, while the red streaks in the corneas of other figures were identified as a sign of age. Now that more of the figures have been published in detail, it is clear that this hypothesis does not adequately explain the evidence. The goddess and her young girls, along with all the lustral basin women and the youngest boy, have blue-streaked corneas. The matrons all have plain white corneas. Two youthful males and one adult man have red-streaked eyes. (The eyes of the fully pubescent young man, unfortunately, are not preserved). If the red and blue streaks indicate age and youth, respectively, then the matronly women should have red, not plain white corneas, and two male youths should have blue-streaked, not red eyes. Clearly, a different explanation must be sought for this feature.

A possible solution is provided by the medicinal properties of saffron from the crocus plants which are ubiquitous in the decoration of Xeste 3. In addition to its well-documented use as a food and dye stuff, saffron is extremely rich in vitamins A and B (riboflavin), and in carotenoids (Madan, Kapur, and Gupta 1966; Garrison 1985, 45)—all of which are lacking from most of the foods that we know were consumed in the Bronze Age Aegaean, where the diet consisted largely of grains, legumes, oil, and wine (McGeor 1987a; 1987b; 1990). A marked symptom of vitamin A or riboflavin deficiency is a clinically distinct red streaking of the corneas, which, if untreated, can lead to significant ocular problems. The modern remedy for this condition, however, is simple: dietary supplementation with normal required doses of vitamins A and B. Individuals with diets high in these two vitamins tend to have better visual acuity and healthier eyes.

Saffron is also very high in carotenoids. An occasional temporary side effect of high carotene levels (sometimes now caused by eating too many carrots) is a condition resembling jaundice, in which the color of the skin turns yellow (carotenemia). The youngest boy, the only male figure in Xeste 3 with blue-streaked corneas, in fact exhibits just this trait (Doumas 1992, pl. 112): his skin is painted a unique yellow-orange instead of the brick red color used for the other male figures. Because carotene is turned into vitamin A in the body, a high carotene diet translates to a diet high in vitamin A, which results in good ocular health (Sebrell and Harris 1967; Garrison 1985, 45). So unlike jaundice, in which the eyes turn yellow, this condition results in bright, healthy eyes, and the yellow skin typically disappears when the dietary level of carotenotes is reduced.

Although none of the women is depicted with a yellow skin, many of them have yellow lips, finger- and toenails, palms and soles, clearly implying that they have been handling saffron, even eating and walking in it. I suggest, therefore, that the frescoes are directly telling us that Thera women had access to large amounts of vitamins A and B through the saffron that they ingested at all stages in their lives and that the youngest boys did as well before they entered pubescence. Note too that the hairstyles of the youngest boy and youngest girls are nearly identical, suggesting that prior to pubescence children form a single gender, as they do in our modern terminology for "children" and "kids." Even the mature women, who have plain white corneas, must have received adequate amounts since their eyes show no signs of the reddening associated with vitamin A or riboflavin deficiency.

Since an adequate supply of vitamins A and B is essential to good health, careful control of a saffron-rich diet contributes directly to high birth weights in babies and thus promotes reproductive success (Sebrell and Harris 1967, 28; Diplock 1985, 44); its use as an emmenagogue would have allowed women to regulate their own menses and thus afforded some control over conception (Madan, Kapur, and Gupta 1966; Lewis and Elvin-Lewis 1977, 352–353; Kamboj 1980). High levels of these vitamins promote good eyesight and general health, and may reduce the risk of some cancers, lower the incidence of coronary disease, and retard aging (Burton 1988). If the women of Thera had a detailed knowledge of the medicinal properties of saffron, such knowledge may have been an important source of women’s power and ability to control their bodies.

The frescoes from Xeste 3 reveal an extraordinary attention to details of women's bodies in terms of physiognomy, breast development, hair-growth, and—if my hypothesis about the red and blue-streaked eyes is correct—about observable symptoms associated with specific dietary supplements. If this interpretation is correct, Xeste 3 could be the first surviving Aegaean building designed and decorated primarily for women. Although it has never been suggested, we ought at least to consider the possibility that the paintings were executed by women for women, especially given their emphasis on female rites that largely exclude men or show them in subordinate roles. In Xeste 3, therefore, we seem to have a building that was intended to be used by women at all stages in their lives, and not just for rites of passage at puberty.

It may not be a coincidence that some of the other plants represented in Aegaean wall paintings like lilies, cactus (rose), irises, and myrtle, also have documented medicinal properties and were associated with the rites of specific goddesses in historical times (Warren 1985). Myrtle, for example, was specifically associated with marriage, but throughout history has been used as well to induce abortions. The prevalence of these and other plants in Bronze Age frescoes on Thera and Crete leads us to wonder what such landscapes really meant (Chapin 1997). Are they simply indicators that the Minoans were the earliest "hippies" or "flower-lovers" (Starr 1984), or might they instead illustrate one of the spheres of women’s activities and powers (Riddle 1992, 1997)? If the latter, then rooms painted with floral landscapes may have designated gathering places for women, like the ground floor room at Akrotiri painted with the famous "spring fresco" (Doumas 1992, pls. 66–76).

Moreover, if the Thera lustral basin painting indicates that the lustral basin was for women’s rites, and if the Xeste 3 basin was used in the same way as the many examples in Cretan palaces and villas (Gesell 1985, 22–26), these unusual architectural features should all have some connection with female rituals. If this identification is correct, the many lustral basins in Neopalatial palaces and villas on
Crete further underscore the central importance of elite women in Minoan society.

Interestingly, no lustral basins were constructed in the Mycenaean Greek palaces on the mainland, and the frescoes of the later patriarchal Mycenaeans virtually abandon the subject of natural landscapes with plants and flowers in favor of militaristic and hunting scenes or repetitive depictions of procession figures, only a few of them with women mechanically grasping tired-looking nosegays of flowers (Immerwahr 1990, 196–197 Py No. 6; 200–201 Th No. 1; 202 Ti No. 7).

By the historical period in Greece, women with detailed knowledge of plants and their properties were often considered potential poisoners or witches like the princess Medea. Aged “wise women” who possessed extraordinary knowledge or “sight” were viewed as threatening even by the men who sought their advice, like Perseus when he visited the Graiai, old women who told him where to find the gorgon, Medusa. At Athens, attempts were made by men to legislate and regulate how and when women associated with one another, even at festivals like the Thesmophoria where men were excluded. The language of the play Thesmophoriazousai by the comic poet Aristophanes reflects male anxieties about the nature of the festival and what exactly went on in women’s homosocial environments.

In classical Greece, descriptions of the sexualized female (and even the adolescent male) body are often couched in terms of the natural landscape or compared to flowers, with a complex interweaving of images (Sargent 1986, 81–101). In mythology, the flowery meadow is the locus where violence and bloodshed intersected for young women. Poseidon raped Medusa in such a setting. Persephone in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter was seized and carried off by her uncle Hades as she gathered flowers in another meadow. Only a powerful, mature goddess like Hera could turn the tables on Zeus in the passage from the Iliad mentioned above, when she seduces him in a field of crocus and other flowers, and not the other way around. Such mythological stories might represent the deliberate suppression of memories of a period in the prehistory of Greece, when women’s knowledge and use of plants gave them power over their bodies, their reproductive functions, and enhanced their general health and quality of life.

While the Thera frescoes alone cannot be construed as evidence for a matriarchy where women exercised sole political control (Thomas 1973), they suggest that a more balanced and complementary division of women’s and men’s roles was recognized publicly and affirmed communally during one period of the Aegean Late Bronze Age.

**Literature Cited**


Paul Rehak


Figure 1. Xeste 3, Akrotiri, isometric reconstruction. (After C. Palyvou in MacGillivray and Barber 1986, 141 fig. 6.)
Figure 2. Monkey frieze from Xeste 3, room 4 (reconstruction) (author).

Figure 3. Minoan sealstone from Knossos (author).
Figure 4. Lustral basin scene, Xeste 3, room 3 (author).
Figure 5. Scene with men, Xeste 3, room 3 closet (author).
Figure 6. Scene with goddess and girls, Xeste 3, room 3, upper floor. (After Marinatos 1984: 62. fig. 40.)

Figure 7. Detail of goddess (author).
Figure 8. Mature processional woman, Xeste 3, upper floor (author).