Although many images of women have survived from the Late Bronze Age Aegean world (ca. 1700–1100 BCE), it has proved extremely difficult for us to recover information about how they constructed their own sexuality at the time. For in contrast to the other cultures of the eastern Mediterranean at the time, or the later cultures of Greece, Aegean art contains virtually no explicit depictions of sexual activity or even personal affection: there are no scenes of women or men engaged in sexual intercourse (or other natural bodily functions, for that matter), no individuals who embrace, kiss, hold hands, or show other signs of intimacy. In addition, we have no literary texts from the Aegean that might describe or discuss sexuality, in contrast to civilizations such as Egypt, which preserve large bodies of literature on the subject. This does not mean, however, that we have no hope of recovering women’s sexuality in prehistoric Greece but simply that the search is more difficult than for other periods and cultures.

One potentially useful source of information in our search for female sexuality consists of the images preserved in Aegean fresco paintings, especially those from the earlier phase of the Late Bronze Age, when the Minoan culture on Crete exerted a powerful influence in the Aegean world. This era, the Neopalatial period (ca. 1700–1490 BCE), saw the decoration of palaces and houses on Crete and important buildings at other Aegean sites with paintings executed in true fresco technique, painted on damp lime plaster, with occasional additions made after the wall surface had dried. The Cretan paintings have generally survived only in small pieces, but almost complete wall paintings have survived from Akrotiri on Thera, which was engulfed in a volcanic eruption ca. 1625 BCE.

I focus attention here on a series of paintings from room 3 in Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, a large freestanding structure of approximately thirty rooms, constructed on three levels and generally regarded as a public building (fig. 2.1).
Though several attempts have been made to interpret these important frescoes, most discussions have minimized the sexual implications of the scenes that depict women in homosocial environments.

In this essay, I shall attempt a more detailed reading of the compositions, concentrating on the activities, gestures, and costumes of the women and the landscape they inhabit, and I shall suggest that the main theme is female rites of passage at all stages of a woman’s life, centering around the medicinal use of saffron. If this is so, then it is possible, using Eva Cantarella’s hypothesis that rites of passage fostered same-sex relationships in early societies, to imagine a homoerotic element among women in prehistoric Greece.

Conventions of Aegean Wall Painting

Aegean art used a color convention to differentiate between women (who are shown with white flesh) and men (who are painted red). We must look to physiognomy, pose, scale, costume, hairstyles, jewelry, and the interactions among figures for additional visual clues. The Aegean frescoes pay particular attention to different age grades and body types as figures mature from childhood into adulthood.
Several analyses of hairstyles in the paintings, in conjunction with observations about body morphology and facial physiognomy, suggest that both sexes selectively cut and groomed their hair in standard styles that mark specific age grades as they matured, a practice important in later Greece and one that has been documented in many other societies. Prepubescent girls wore a forelock and backlock but shaved the rest of their skulls; at the beginning of the pubescence, the cranial hair was allowed to grow in curls, and the fore- and backlocks grew even longer. By the end of puberty, girls had a full head of hair and may have cut their forelocks, as they did in Classical times, to mark the important transition to adulthood. Adult women wore their hair long or tied it in a kerchief like the Classical sakko. A few female hairstyles depicted in the frescoes do not fit into this progression, and thus some girls may have followed different courses of hair growth and cutting, and—we may therefore assume—social development, as they matured.

Less work has been done on male coiffures, but it is clear that the hairstyle for prepubescent boys was very similar to that of girls. Perhaps youngsters were considered a single (asexual) gender, despite the difference in skin colors, as the later Greek word παιδία and our own neutral term “children” suggest.

The cut, color, and decoration of clothing can also be important sources of social information, particularly among the women who actually produced the textiles. At all periods, Aegean women tend to wear more elaborate and voluminous costumes than men. Both girls and women wear a short-sleeved robe, which is open above the waist to expose the chest area even in the case of children; this garment is calf-length for girls and ankle-length for adult women. Although the female breast is often depicted exposed, there is no evidence that it had a sexual connotation, as it did in historical Greece or does in modern western cultures. In fact, since Aegean artists show a great awareness of several stages of breast development, it is possible that women used the exposure of the chest to monitor and communicate the stages of their own physical development to one another.

Women of all ages may wear a heavy apron that is wrapped around the hips and secured at the waist with ties, or a type of girdle (apparently a single or double roll of fabric) encircling the waist just above the hips. The combination of robe, apron, and girdle may represent special costumes rather than everyday wear. Men, by contrast, often wear kilts or a breechcloth and codpiece, while boys and even youths may be nude or wear only a belt.

Jewelry also communicates important social information about age, rank,
status, and occupation. Excavated finds also attest many types of Aegean jewelry that are represented in the Xeste 3 frescoes: hairpins, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and anklets. Jewelry tassels could also be attached to clothing.

Finally, Aegean art tends to show both women and men in outdoor settings, where architecture serves as a backdrop or a frame of reference for human activities. Within these settings, women and men usually form sexually segregated groups, even when they appear together in towns or palaces, and women are usually shown on a larger scale, in more central positions, and they perform more important acts.

The crocus that is being gathered and that is depicted throughout the frescoes of Xeste 3 is probably saffron crocus, the *crocus sativus*, a cultivated plant whose bulbs need to be replanted on a 6–7-year cycle, rather than *crocus cartwrightianus*, which grows wild. *Crocus sativus* blossoms in late October for just a few days, and it is then that its yellow-orange stigmas must be harvested quickly and dried for use as saffron, the many uses of which will be considered in more depth later. In the frescoes, the plants have yellow, not green, leaves, and the living stigmas are painted red, the color they actually take only when dried. The blossoms originally had brilliant purple petals, which have now faded or turned gray.

The Paintings of Xeste 3

In Xeste 3, it is very likely that most public rooms (as opposed to service areas) had painted wall decorations, although not all these have yet been restored and reconstructed. Aside from those with women, which we shall examine in detail, the first large room that one encountered upon entering the building, room 4, contained a fresco depicting blue monkeys wielding swords and playing lyres. Since blue monkeys (*cercopithecus aethiops aethiops*) were imported from Egypt to Crete and thence to other islands such as Thera, their presence immediately signals that the visitor has entered an exotic, liminal zone. In Egypt, monkeys are usually associated with women and female sexuality; since they sometimes appear with women in the Aegean, but never with men, they probably also imply that women were the main users of Xeste 3.

The adjacent ground-floor room 3 has been subdivided into compartments by pier and door partitions (*polýthýra*), a feature that allowed parts of ceremonial rooms to be opened up or closed off from view. One compartment, a sunken pit or "lustral basin," is set into the northeast corner of the ground-floor room 3, approached by a short flight of steps. The two walls
above it are painted with a Minoan-style shrine facade and a composition of three women in a rocky landscape that includes crocuses (fig. 2.2). The function of “lustral basins” has received much attention, but no consensus has been reached; they are evidently not bathrooms, since they lack drains, and because they have flights of steps, they were obviously meant to be entered. Some have a low balustrade along one side, evidently so observers could watch from above: thus, the basins were settings for spectacle.

The shrine facade painted on one wall is surmounted by the so-called horns of consecration, which probably represent a stylized mountain peak rather than animal horns. Extraordinarily, the horns are streaked red. These streaks were first interpreted as drops of blood, but a recent examination suggests instead that they are coated with saffron stigmas. The red horns may be an apotropaic sign, meant to turn aside evil. Set in the painted facade below is a pair of door panels, likewise streaked with red and carrying a design of red lily flowers.

This facade is reminiscent of the peak sanctuary carved in low relief on the impressive stone “Sanctuary Rhyton” from Zakros in east Crete (fig. 2.3). That shrine is set in a mountainous landscape that also includes rockwork with crocus, wild goats (agrimia), and birds but no human figures. The shrine painting on the lustral basin wall, however, suggests that the observer is located out of doors in a mountain setting, not in a sunken pit. Perhaps the floor of the lustral basin can be equated with the courtyard in front of the shrine, as represented on the stone vase.

On the adjacent wall of the Xeste 3 lustral basin, we see three female figures: these include, from left to right, a woman swinging a necklace, a seated
woman with a bleeding foot, and a girl on tiptoe enveloped in a yellow veil (fig. 2.4). The Necklace Swinger and seated Wounded Woman have similar long coiffures, firm chins, shallow breasts, and ankle-length skirts that indicate that they are fully pubescent and sexually mature, about 14–16 years of age. By contrast, the shorter, slighter Veiled Girl to the right is still in early pubescence, age 12–14: since she extends both arms in front of her, we cannot see her chest, 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 ground line and close physical proximity link the Wounded Woman and Veiled Girl and locate them in the open area before the shrine facade; the Necklace Swinger stands apart at a lower level, as if approaching the sanctuary with an offering of jewelry. The similarity in physiognomy and hairstyle link the Necklace Swinger and Wounded Woman, but their differences in costume and jewelry clearly distinguish the one from the other.

Several features call attention to the Wounded Woman in this composition: she is located near the center of the scene, she is much larger in scale
than the others, and she is framed by the rockwork on which she sits and by pendent rockwork that hangs from the top of the scene like a canopy. Since she is the only one so framed, she seems isolated from the other two figures.

Seated figures in Aegean art are often goddesses or important individuals, but the posture of the Wounded Woman is unique: she appears to have her right leg crossed over the left knee, and she leans forward slightly. She rests her head against the palm of her left hand and extends the right arm toward her foot, the sole of which is elevated slightly above the ground line. Red streaks of blood stream from the underside of the foot toward a single large crocus blossom underneath it. It is not clear whether the young woman is reaching to touch her bleeding foot or to pick up the blossom, but since this flower is not attached to a plant and simply hangs in space, it must serve as a sign or symbol standing for or referring to something else and perhaps carries a multiplicity of associations.

In addition to the unique pose, the Wounded Woman has an unusual costume and jewelry. Along with her blouse, which is open to reveal the chest, she wears a draped but untied apron with lappets that somewhat recall the dangling strands of a hula skirt. In historical times, the loosened belt can be a reference to impending childbirth, but the Wounded Woman's abdomen is slim and flat, indicating that she is not pregnant. The form of the apron also recalls that of the prehistoric "string skirt," which Elizabeth Barber has noted was used in many early European societies to advertise sexual maturity, readiness for marriage, and sexual activity.

In Iliad Book 14, Homer describes how Hera borrows such a tasseled garment from Aphrodite when she sets out to seduce Zeus on Mt. Ida, to distract him from directing the fortunes of the Trojan War. A garment that simultaneously conceals and reveals the body underneath it has usually been
considered an erotic device to make a woman more attractive to a man.
An important aspect of the myth, however, is that the goddesses share an
intimate article of apparel with one another. Because the garment of the
Wounded Woman is simply draped but not tied, it hints at the presence of
the naked body underneath, since it would fall off if she were to stand up.
Her only observer in the painting, however, is another woman—the Neck-
lace Swinger.

As if to emphasize that the link between the image of the blood/crocus
blossom and the Wounded Woman is not coincidental, the belt of her gar-
ment is decorated with a chain of crocus buds.27 This design has not been
noticed in previous discussions, but it is clearly important, because it also
echoes the clumps of crocus growing from the rocks on which the Wounded
Woman sits. These visual repetitions reinforce the notion that crocus is cen-
tral to the meaning of this figure.

The floral hairpins worn by the Wounded Woman, one over the fore-
head in the shape of a myrtle twig and the other with an iris finial in a knot
of hair at the nape, are also unusual. Related hairpins of gold and silver have
been excavated on Crete, where they sometimes carry Linear A inscriptions.28
The surface of one surviving example is even incised with a row of crocus
blossoms.29 The plants that the pins imitate carry a special meaning. Myrtle,
for example, was specifically associated in historical times with Aphrodite
and thus with marriage, but the plant can also be used medicinally to induce
abortion or cause the onset of labor in pregnant women.30

The identity of this figure is clearly crucial to our understanding of the
lustral-basin scene. Her gesture of hand to forehead has usually been inter-
preted as one of pain or grief,31 but it could be shock at the sight of the
blood or even a gesture of introspection and self-awareness. The severely
contracted, seated pose might also be intended to relieve abdominal cramps.

The features enumerated above suggest that the Wounded Woman has
been dressed and bejeweled deliberately, probably by other women, for a
particular ritual occasion. She is not an individual who has had an accident,
as some scholars have maintained, nor is she completely recognizable as a
mythological figure such as Persephone, Demeter, or Eurydice.32

The repeated references to crocus in the lustral-basin scene suggest that
the juxtaposition of blood and blossom could be a metaphor or substitute
for several types of female bleeding, including menstruation, the rupture of
the hymen, or childbirth. All these occasions were often marked and cele-
brated by female rites of passage in ancient and early modern societies,33 re-
inforcing the sense that the shedding of female blood is significant. Because
no man is present, there is no obvious reference to defloration, and since there is also no infant, childbirth seems excluded. Menstruation therefore seems the likeliest possibility. If this is so, it is important to note that the event is being celebrated with rich garments and adornment with special jewelry, not marginalized or stigmatized. The ritualization of the event is suggested as well by the shrine facade on the adjacent wall and by the location of the paintings in a lustral basin, a special architectural area.

The Veiled Girl averts her eyes from the bloodshed of the Wounded Woman and looks back toward the shrine with its red-streaked horns. She may be too young to participate or even understand whatever activity or experience is taking place in front of her, but her diaphanous yellow veil covered with red spots that envelops her body suggests that she too is undergoing a transition. In historical Greece, garments dyed yellow with saffron crocus stigmas include the wedding veil and the krokotos, which was put on briefly by the prepubescent girls who served Artemis at Brauron in preparation for their assumption of adult roles and duties. Both are costumes that were worn only to mark a rite of passage and are restricted to females. In historical times, saffron-dyed garments were generally considered inappropriate for men, and Aristophanes mocks as effeminate the men who wore this color. The red spots on the Thera veil, however, make the garment unlike those attested in Classical times and suggest that the veil has been sprinkled with blood.

Since the Veiled Girl turns toward the shrine and away from the onset of the Wounded Woman's first menses, and since she has continued to shave her hair long after the others have begun to grow theirs, it may be that she has already chosen a different role in life, signaled by her hairstyle.

It is surely significant that all three figures in the Thera lustral-basin painting are associated with crocus flowers or the saffron-yellow dye derived from its stigmas. The Necklace Swinger and Veiled Girl have blouses adorned with blossoms and stigmas (the purple petals are much faded but can still be made out) and by yellow garments. The Necklace-Swinger also has a garland of crocus stigmas draped across her chest and over her shoulders. As noted above, the Wounded Woman's unusual belt carries a repeating pattern of crocus buds, her foot bleeds over a crocus blossom, and she sits on rocks from which clumps of crocus grow. There is thus a complex interweaving of color and floral imagery that unites all the women despite their individual differences.

A separate ground-floor compartment located near the lustral basin in Xeste 3 depicts four male figures whose body types and facial features indi-
cate that they are shown at four distinct age grades: a prepubescent child (8–10), a boy in early pubescence (10–12), a young man in full pubescence (16–18), and a seated mature man with a slight paunch, clad in a white kilt (fig. 2.5).38 The last is the only one of these individuals who is clothed, and none wears jewelry, indicating that all are of relatively low status or a different class, particularly noteworthy when we compare them with the richly adorned women from the building. At the same time, it would be a mistake to think of these as inconsequential figures: seated male figures are very rare in Aegean art,39 and the eldest youth turns his head back in the same manner as the Veiled Girl, a highly unusual pose.

Each male figure holds a metal vessel or piece of fabric; the gold-colored cup once held by the youngest boy has unfortunately been erased in cleaning. Comparisons for these metal vessels can be found among the containers excavated on Crete, Thera, and the mainland, most of which were probably manufactured at a few Minoan palace centers, such as Knossos.40 The fabric that one individual holds does not resemble any of the costumes worn by women in the building, but its red, white, blue, and black colors, along with the presence of undulating bands, somewhat recalls the decoration of the abstract relief fresco, modeled in plaster and then painted, from a third-floor room in Xeste 3.41 The procession fresco from the west Entrance Corridor of the Knossos palace shows other men carrying metal containers and a man offering another piece of fabric to an important woman.42

The youngest boy in Xeste 3 differs from the rest because his skin is painted an orange-yellow color, in contrast to the older males who have darker red skins; we shall return to this anomaly later.

Directly above the lustral basin, in room 3 on the upper floor, a composition over two walls depicts four young girls who gather crocus blossoms
in a mountainous landscape and offer them in baskets to a goddess enthroned on a high platform set atop Minoan incurved bases (fig. 2.6). One girl stands on the foot of the platform and empties a basket of crocus blossoms into a large pannier, while another girl approaches from the far right, with her basket balanced on her shoulder, its handle steadied by a string. On the adjacent wall are two more girls, both of whom are picking the blossoms. The first holds her basket in one hand and turns her head back toward her companion; the other has set her basket on the ground and climbs a small hillock to reach for a new blossom to add to those cupped in the palm of her other hand.

Because all the girls wear short skirts, have snub noses, receding chins, partially shaved heads with short curls, and flat chests with barely budding nipples, they must be prepubescent, about 8—10 years of age. The girl with the basket on her shoulder has red hair and blue eyes, as if she represents a different, non-Greek ethnic type. If so, she is almost the only “other” person shown in Aegean art.

Despite minor differences among the girls in terms of hairstyle and physiognomy, the two conjoined compositions on the adjacent walls of this upper-floor room both have clumps of crocus depicted as a repeating background pattern. Thus, the scenes appear to form a unified narrative, an interpreta-
tion that is supported by the gathering of crocus blossoms and stigmas for saffron and their presentation to the divinity.

The central goddess on one wall is the most important figure, and every visual element in her representation draws our eye (fig. 2.7). She is enthroned on the highest stage of a tripartite platform and is flanked by unusual animals in a heraldic composition—a blue monkey to the left who offers her saffron stigmas with a courtly gesture and a rampant griffin to the right, illusionistically tethered by a red collar and leash to the edge of an actual window set in the wall of the room. She is thus a Mistress of Animals or Potnia Theron, a well-known aspect in historical times of Artemis.

The goddess is the largest as well as the most richly dressed, coiffed, and bejeweled figure painted in Xeste 3. She wears a diaphanous blue robe decorated and bordered with crocus blossoms and over it, a blue and white apron. Her elaborate jewelry includes a string of beads in her hair, necklaces of duck- and dragonfly-shaped beads, earrings, and several bracelets. A pair of crocus stigmas hangs against one cheek; as elsewhere, the purple petals have faded, but this is probably a blossom hanging over one ear, rather than a tattoo. She also wears a distinctive forehead band like all the young girls, but her shallow breast and facial features are so similar to those of the Neck-
lace Swinger and the Wounded Woman from the floor below that we must imagine her as being about the same age, 14—16 years old. The relative youth of this divinity and her association with young girls strongly imply that she incorporates some of the functions of the later historical Artemis, who was attended by young girls in sanctuaries at Brauron and elsewhere.

Three other compositions from the upper floor, possibly belonging to other walls of this room, are still undergoing conservation and restoration. A separate marsh scene with two types of reeds, half a dozen male and female ducks, a nest with ducklings waiting to be fed, and red dragonflies against a white background suggest a different type of landscape setting from the mountaintop where the crocus gathering takes place. The ducks and dragonflies, however, recur as beads in the goddess' necklaces, while the birds' nests find parallels in a frieze from ground-floor room 4. In Bronze Age Egypt, ducks were associated with women and with female sexuality, while in later Archaic Greek art, the birds are a frequent attribute of Artemis as "mistress of animals."50

Another scene from the upper floor shows a file of mature women with full breasts and hair tied in snoods (fig. 2.8).51 Unlike the younger female figures from Xeste 3, these adults lack earrings and elaborate jewelry, but their costumes are rich in floral iconography. One wears a saffron-yellow blouse decorated with red lilies and over it, a yellow garment with undulating borders (perhaps a dyed fleece rather than cloth) draped across one shoulder and covered with red roses.52 Another has a yellow blouse with red crocus stigmas and wears a crocus over one ear, like the seated goddess. Her fleecy overgarment is blood red, and she holds a basket like those of the crocus-gathering girls; perhaps she performed this activity as a girl.53 A third woman carries a sheaf of white lilies and wears a single lily blossom at the back of the head.54 Possibly related to this scene is a large panel that depicts white lilies against a red background.55 These matrons could be the mothers of the crocus-gathering girls described earlier.

Interpretation

I have already suggested some possible interpretations of individual scenes within Xeste 3. It is now time to consider the pictorial program of the building as a whole. While the extraordinary iconographic content of the frescoes was recognized from the moment the paintings were unearthed, scholars have long debated whether Aegean frescoes generally are mainly decorative (like wallpaper) or are primarily religious, with a wide range of opinion between these two extremes.56
For example, Nanno Marinatos has proposed and argued a primarily religious interpretation of the Xeste 3 frescoes in several studies. She identifies the program of Xeste 3 as a general representation of women’s puberty rites and the seasonal renewal of nature.\(^{57}\) Suzanne Amigues, by contrast, has focused on the economic importance of the saffron gathering in the frescoes for a source of food and dyestuff and takes the position that the scenes from Xeste 3 simply depict the centrality of saffron culture as an economic commodity in the lives of ancient Theran women.\(^{58}\) Both views may be partially correct, since it is likely that early societies made less of a distinction between secular and religious spheres than we do today.\(^{59}\)

Saffron is obviously important in these frescoes, and obviously important to women. It is probably significant too that while males are also depicted, they appear in a separate room and are apparently of lesser status. At the same time, similar physiognomies for both sexes indicate the existence
of four parallel age grades. The earliest stage of prepubescence includes the boy with the yellowish skin and the flower-gathering girls; for the latter, this stage coincides with a period of service to a goddess in whose presence they are shown. A more advanced state is represented by the Veiled Girl and the boy with the metal basin: they are taller than the children and have similar facial features; the penis of the boy is relatively small but clearly indicated. Full puberty, the third stage, is illustrated by the Necklace Swinger, Wounded Woman, and the youth holding the cloth. A fourth stage, of full adulthood, includes the matronly processional women (who are the least elaborately adorned of the female figures) and the seated man with the hydria.

The different type of pubescence marked by the Veiled Girl’s unusual hairstyle and different costume may indicate the existence of a separate, different course open to some girls as they matured; and since she veils herself and averts her eyes toward the shrine from the bloodshed associated with full pubescence, she may be destined ultimately for the status of virgin priestess.

If my hypotheses are correct, they seem to indicate that the identification of the scenes as general puberty rites for women is far too simplistic, and the frescoes instead are outlining the importance in Aegean society of successive rituals of maturation for women at all ages with reference to a specific goddess, localizing each stage within a more inclusive society of women. Moreover, references to saffron abound for all these women, whatever their age and status within this homosocial sisterhood.

An understanding of the properties of saffron crocus may provide clues for a more detailed interpretation of the various scenes with women. 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 digestive, stimulant, aromatic, aphrodisiac, narcotic, and emmenagogue; it can ease menstruation and in higher doses can induce abortion. In very high doses, it is said to cause insanity and death. In addition to its well-attested use as a food and dyestuff, saffron has also been documented to provide an important source of vitamins. Saffron is extremely rich in vitamins A and B (riboflavin) and carotenoids, especially carotenes — all of which are lacking from most of the foods we know were consumed in the Bronze Age Aegean, where the diet consisted largely of grains, legumes, oil, figs, grapes, and wine. Saffron thus has a variety of applications pertaining to general good health.

In an article some years ago, Ellen Davis called attention to an unusual detail in the way the eyes of some figures in these frescoes were depicted.
Several individuals have light 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 figures have been published in detail, it is clear that this hypothesis does not adequately explain the evidence. The goddess and young girls, along with all the lustral-basin women and the youngest boy, have blue-streaked corneas. The matrons all have plain white corneas. The two youthful males and the one adult man have red-streaked eyes (the eyes of another youth are not preserved). What the red and blue streaks indicate is not age and youth but rather a condition that links the young women and the youngest boy.

The medicinal properties of saffron are responsible for the different condition of the eyes. 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. These include corneal lesions, conjunctivitis, sensitivity to light, eye irritation and increased tearing, and a decrease in the sharpness of vision. An accompanying factor is an inflammation of mucous membranes of the face, especially around the lips (cheilosis) and tongue (glossitis). The modern remedy for these conditions is simple: dietary supplementation with the 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, however, is also very high in carotenes. 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: his skin is painted a unique pale 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. But unlike jaundice, in which the eyes also turn yellow, this condition results in bright, healthy eyes, and the yellow skin typically disappears when the dietary level of carotenes is reduced.

Even though the women in the building are represented with white, rather than yellowish, skins, the frescoes seem to be telling us that the culture and ingestion of saffron was principally a female activity, and one that was relevant at all stages of a woman’s life, not just at puberty. Young boys may have had similar access to saffron because they were dependent on their mothers before they entered pubescence, when they presumably started taking part in male activities. 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.

It is probable therefore that the Theran women not only cultivated and harvested the crocus and supplied themselves and their dependent children with the saffron, but since the red eyes of males apparently indicate that they had low levels of vitamin A, they also denied men access to saffron.

Since an adequate supply of vitamins A and B is essential to good health, we can assume that women carefully controlled their saffron-rich diet; we also know that this kind of diet contributes directly to high birth weights in babies and thus promotes reproductive success.66 Its use as an emmenagogue, to induce and ease menstruation, would have allowed women to regulate their own menses, to afford some control over conception, and even to induce abortions if they wished.67 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. The women of Thera must have had a detailed experiential knowledge of the medicinal properties of saffron, a knowledge that should also have been an important source of women’s power and ability to experience a personal control of their bodies and thus their lives.

The frescoes from Xeste 3 thus document Aegean women’s extraordinary awareness of, and attention to, their body, its development, and its maintenance. In this female homosocial world depicted in a public building at Akrotiri, where men are obviously of lesser status and deprived of access to a source of nutrition that gave power instead to women, it would be surprising indeed if these healthy women did not express their care and attention for each other erotically.

Because there is a gap in our literary sources between the Bronze Age and the historical period, we cannot be sure that such social traditions survived unchanged. Nevertheless, the evidence of later authors suggests that even after the prehistoric period, floral landscapes were understood as a setting where women could express and explore their sexuality with one another. In Fragment 2, Sappho invokes Aphrodite to visit a paradise landscape with flowers that excludes men and permits homosocial, even erotic, relationships among women, very much like the construction I have tried to suggest here for the Bronze Age.68 She is the exception, however. The landscape that Sappho envisions as a protected realm in which women could express their sexuality with other women has been transformed into a landscape that reflects a patriarchal need for ownership and control.
In the Archaic and Classical periods, descriptions of the sexualized female body, and even that of the adolescent male, are often couched in terms of the natural landscape or compared to flowers, with a complex interweaving of images. Thus, when Zeus in the form of a bull rapes Europa as she gathers flowers, he "breathes out a crocus flower from his mouth" to entice the unwaried girl. In *Homerica Hymn to Demeter*, the four (unmarried) daughters of King Keleus and Queen Metaneira are "like goddesses in the flower of their youth" and have hair that "streams about their shoulders like a crocus flower," presumably because it has not been cut yet in anticipation of marriage. Landscapes with flowers that include crocus are the setting for the rape of Persephone by her uncle, Hades, and the lovemaking of Hera and Zeus in the *Iliad*.

Though more examples could be added, these few examples illustrate the ways in which the prehistoric homosocial landscape of women had changed by the historical period. Women with detailed knowledge of plants and their properties were often considered potential poisoners or witches such as Medea. The sharing of knowledge among women at festivals that excluded men had become a locus for male insecurity, as Aristophanes’ play, *Thesmophoriazousai*, indicates. Certainly by the Classical period in Athens, the homosocial landscape of women had become the erotic domain of men.

The frescoes from Xeste 3 seem to document that a different situation obtained during the Late Bronze Age, at least for one Aegean society. Women are the protagonists throughout the painted program of an important building of the town, and they are shown in different roles than those revealed in other frescoes from Minoan and Mycenae sites. Rather than marginalizing women, these paintings from Thera illustrate the centrality of women’s personal relationships with one another, and present occasions when women could explore their own sexuality with one another.

**Notes**

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12. In Archaic Greece, by contrast, men are sometimes shown touching or grasping an exposed female breast as an allusion to intercourse or marriage or, in the case of divinities, the hieros gamos or sacred marriage. See Beth Cohen, “Divesting the Breast of Clothes in Classical Sculpture,” in A. Koloski-Ostrow and C. Lyons, eds., Naked Truths (London: Routledge, 1997) 66–92.


25. Pausanias 1.31.1 on the cult of Leto at Zoster.


27. This detail was misinterpreted by Barber, Prehistoric Textiles 317 and fig. 15.3, as a “yo-yo pattern with oval fillers.” A similar pattern of crocus buds enclosed by wavy lines occurs on a jug of late Neopalatial date found at Ayia Triada: Federico Halbherr, Enrico Stefani, and Luisa Banti, “Hagia Triada nel periodo tardo palaziale,” Atti dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. Classe di Scienze morali, politiche e storiche. Rendiconti. 8° serie, serie di lettere, 44 (1977 [1980]): 68, 67 fig. 37. See Rehak, forthcoming.

28. Stelios Alexiou, “Καθαρισμός αργυρίων αντικειμένων στο εργαστήριο του Μουσείου


31. E.g., N. Marinatos, Art and Religion in Thera 79; and N. Marinatos, Minoan Religion 207, 208.

32. N. Marinatos, Art and Religion in Thera 78–80, interprets her both as Eurydice and as a crocus picker who has dropped a blossom, ignoring the fact that she lacks the basket of the flower-picking girls in the fresco from the upper floor and is much older than they are. Barber, Women’s Work 115, argues that she is a crocus-gathering girl who has stubbed her foot on the rocks.


36. Aristophanes, Ekklesiazousai 331–332; cf. Lyssistrata 49–51 on yellow as a women’s color.
Unusually, Jason has a yellow mantle (κροκόκεϊν εἷμα) in Pindar’s Fourth Olympian Ode 232. I
thank M. Kwintner for this reference. A colossal statue of Dionysos, carried in the great
procession of Ptolemy I Philadelphus in Alexandria, was draped with a diaphanous krokoto-
ts (κροκωτῶν διαφανή), perhaps because of the god’s androgynous qualities or his appeal
to women: Athenaios, Deipnosophistae 5.198c. The ghost of the barbarian king Darius in the
Persians of Aeschylus wears yellow sandals: κροκόβασται ποδός εὖμαιν, 660.
37. Noted by Porter, “Theran Wall Paintings’ Flora.”
οἱ κινοκέφαλοι στὴν τέχνη τῆς Θῆρας,” ΕΙΔΑΠΙΝΗ. Τόμος τυμητικός για τον Καθηγητή
40. Ellen Davis, The Vapheio Cups and Aegean Gold and Silver Ware (New York: Garland, 1977);
Hartmut Matthäus, Die Bronzegefäße der kretisch-mykenischen Kultur (Munich: Prähistorische
Bronzefunde II.1, 1986).
41. Doumas, Wall-Paintings of Thera pls. 113, 136–137.
42. Christos Bouloufis, “Nochmals zum Prozessionsfresco von Knossos: Palast und
Darbringung von Prestige-Objekten,” in R. Hägg and N. Marinatos, eds., The Function of
the Minoan Palaces: Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium at the Swedish Institute in Athens, 10–
Athens, 1987) 145–156.
44. Doumas, Wall-Paintings of Thera pls. 116–121.
45. Black figures, perhaps sub-Saharan African natives, appear in frescoes at Knossos,
Mycenae, and Pylos: Immerwahr, Aegean Painting 176 Kn no. 27, 191 My no. 6, 197 Py no. 7.
46. Nanno Marinatos, “An Offering of Saffron to the Minoan Goddess of Nature:
The Role of the Monkey and the Importance of Saffron,” in Gifts to the Gods, ed. T. Linders
47. Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (Zurich and Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1981–
a concise summary of Artemis and her cults, see Walter Burkert, Greek Religion (Cambridge,
48. Some terracotta figurines appear to have facial tattoos. Cf. the large plaster head
from Mycenae: Spyridon Marinatos and Max Hirmer, Crete and Mycenae (New York: Harry
49. Doumas, Wall-Paintings of Thera pl. 135. Several new additions were presented at the
1997 Thera conference (publication forthcoming). I thank Karen P. Foster for discussing
these with me.
50. For Egyptian cosmetic vessels in the form of ducks or with duck iconography, see
Arelle P. Kozloff and Betsy M. Bryan, Egypt’s Dazzling Sun: Amenhotep III and His World (Cleve-


53. Cf. Aristophanes’ chorus of women, describing its service to Artemis in *Lysistrata* 641–647: “At seven I carried the sacred container; at ten I ground the sacred grain; next I played the bear at Brauron wearing the yellow garment (*krokotos*), and finally—as a beautiful maiden—I wore a string of figs and served as a basket-carrier (*kanephoros*).”


55. S. Marinatos, *Thera* vi 17, pl. 24c. S. Marinatos noted that the figure of a woman found nearby may belong to the same composition—a continuation of the procession of women, perhaps?


58. Amigues, “Le crocus et le safran.”


63. Davis, “Youth and Age.”


68. This view was persuasively argued by J. M. Snyder in a lecture, “Love in the Apple Orchard: Sacred Space in the Lyrics of Sappho,” presented by the Department of Classics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 6, 1998.


70. Scholiast on *Iliad* 12.92: ἡλλαξεν ἑαυτὸν ἐίς ταύρον καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ στόματος κρόκων ἐπνεύω ὡς τῆν Εὐρώπην ἀπατήσας. (“So he transformed himself into a bull and breathed out a crocus flower from his mouth. Thus he tricked Europa.”)

71. *Homer’s Hymn to Demeter* 108: ὡστε θεαί, κοιρήμοιν ἀνθὸς ἔχουσάς (“They were like goddesses being in the first flower of their youth.”); 177–178: ἀμφι δὲ χαίται ὤμοις ἀδιασωτο κροκητίῳ ὀμοία (“And around their shoulders their long locks streamed like a crocus flower.”)

72. *Iliad* 14.347–350: τάσι, δ’ ὑπὸ χθῶν διὰ φύσει νενηθλέα ποιήν, / λατόν θ’ ἐροσθεντα ἵδε κρόκων ἥδ’ ἐκκυμοσ / περικάν καὶ μαλακόν, ὡς ἀπὸ-χθυνῶς ψύχος ἐρευγέ. (“And beneath them the divine earth made new grass grow up, along with dew-sprinkled lotus and crocus and hyacinth thick and soft, which cushioned them high above the ground.”)