

Myth, Medicine, and Matriarchy: Reconstructing a Female Homosocial Environment in the Thera Frescoes

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The volcanic eruption of 1628/7 B.C. which buried and preserved the town of Akrotiri on Thera provides an unparalleled opportunity for archaeologists to attempt a detailed reconstruction of the fresco program of a Late Bronze Age Aegean building. We have chosen to focus our attention on the paintings from Xeste 3, a large free-standing building of approximately 30 rooms, constructed on three levels. The nearly life-sized representations of the human figure in its paintings encode a wealth of cultural information in terms of pose, costume, hairstyle, jewelry, and how individuals are composed singly and in groups. 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. In this paper, we would like to attempt a more nuanced, gendered reading.

While a complete discussion of Xeste 3 needs to take into account the architecture and contents, as well as all the painted decoration of the building, we would like to focus here on four main compositions. These include a frieze of blue monkeys and swallows from ground floor room 4, two compartments in ground floor room 3 which show discrete groups of women and men, and a composition from room 3 on the upper floor which includes a goddess with young girls, a marsh scene, and a procession of mature women. The frescoes make repeated visual references to *crocus sativus*, a cultivar whose bulbs need to be replanted on a 6-7 year cycle. These plants blossom in October over just a few days, when their yellow-orange stigmas are harvested and dried for use. In the Thera frescoes, the stigmas are painted red, the color of the dried stigmas, and the crocuses originally had brilliant purple petals which have faded or turned gray; we therefore must now use our imagination to reconstruct the vivid, glowing colors on the walls in their original state.

The frieze from ground floor room 4 depicts a rocky landscape with swallows, their nests, and young, along with blue monkeys that wield swords and scabbards or hold gold lyres. Since blue monkeys are exotic creatures, imported from Egypt to Crete and thence to other islands like Thera, their presence immediately signals that the visitor has entered a liminal, supernatural zone. Both on Crete and in Egypt, blue monkeys are usually associated with women and female sexuality as on the faience bowl seen here. 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 the Arkalochori Cave in the center of the island, along with double axes. A contemporary sealstone from Knossos shows a matronly woman holding a similar sword and scabbard, perhaps recalling Demeter's later epithet as "goddess of the golden sword."

Ground floor room 3 has been subdivided into compartments by pier and door partitions, a Minoan feature. One compartment, a sunken "lustral basin" is painted on two walls with a Minoan style shrine facade surmounted by horns of consecration, and a composition of 3 women in a rocky landscape that includes crocuses. The shrine facade in the painting is reminiscent of the peak-sanctuary setting carved in low relief on the stone "Sanctuary Rhyton" from Zakros in east Crete, which also includes rockwork with crocus but no human figures.

On the adjoining wall of Xeste 3, 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. The "Veiled Girl" to right is in early pubescence, age 12-14: we cannot see her chest, but her 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 unique attributes. The former wears hairpins with floral finials and a draped but untied apron with lappets that recalls a hula skirt. Such garments have been connected by Elizabeth Barber to the prehistoric "string skirt" used to advertize sexual maturity and readiness for marriage. In the Iliad, 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, 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 which followed one another in quick succession in most ancient societies.

The Veiled Girl averts her eyes from this bloodshed, although her red-spotted yellow drapery suggests that she too is undergoing a transition; yellow garments in historical Greece include Iphigeneia's wedding veil and the saffron-dyed *krokotos* worn by the prepubescent girls who served Artemis at Brauron in preparation for their assumption of adult roles and duties. All three Thera women have costumes embroidered or woven with crocus: the Necklace Swinger and Veiled Girl have blouses with blossoms and stigmas, while the Wounded Woman's unusual belt carries a repeating pattern of crocus buds. A similar design occurs on some Minoan pottery of about the same time.

A nearby ground floor compartment depicts four male figures whose body types and facial features indicate that they are shown at four distinct age grades: a prepubescent boy (8-10), 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, indicators that they are of relatively low status, particularly when we compare them to the richly adorned women from the building. Each male figure holds a metal vessel or piece of fabric; the gold cup held by the boy has unfortunately been erased in cleaning. The orange-yellow skin color of this youngest boy differs from the older males who have red skins: we shall return to this anomaly later.

In room 3 on the upper floor, 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 incurved bases. Because the girls wear short skirts, 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. The goddess is richly dressed, coiffed, and bejeweled, with necklaces that include duck and dragonfly pendants like those in a marsh scene on an adjoining wall. 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 and a leashed griffin. She is thus a Mistress of Animals or Potnia Theron. But her shallow breast and facial features are so similar to those of the Necklace Swinger and the Wounded Woman that she must be about the same age, 14-16 years old. The relative youth of this divinity and her association with young girls strongly recalls the functions of the historical Artemis.

An opposite wall of this room shows a file of mature women with full breasts and hair tied in snoods, reminiscent of the woman on the Knossos sealstone seen earlier. All carry different bouquets of flowers, and one holds a basket like those of the flower-picking girls opposite. Like the goddess, the woman with basket also wears a crocus blossom over one ear, perhaps signaling a special relationship between them.

How are we to interpret this wealth of pictorial data from Xeste 3? Previous scholars have focused on the economic importance of saffron-gathering for a food and dyestuff, or have identified the pictorial program of the building as a general representation of women's puberty rites. We believe that a more nuanced reading is possible, and that the images bear significantly on our attempts to reconstruct prehistoric Aegean society. While Aegean art generally shows men and women in sexually segregated groups, it seems noteworthy to us that all of our diagnostic criteria: pose, costume, hairstyle, and jewelry, call attention to the role of women -- particularly young 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: prepubescence (coinciding with a period of service to a goddess), 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 seems to indicate the existence of a separate, different course open to some girls as they matured: she continues to shave parts of her head long after the prepubescent girls 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 Iphigeneia -- destined for the status of virgin priestess.

At the same time, references to saffron abound for all these women, whatever their age and status within this homosocial sisterhood. A wide range of uses for saffron is known or suggested in the medical pharmacopiae, past and present, from around the world: it can reportedly be used as a eupeptic, stimulant, aromatic, aphrodisiac, emmenagogue, an abortifacient, and narcotic; in high doses, it is said to cause insanity and death. Its scientifically documented properties have been largely ignored, however, but may be significant.

In an earlier article in the AJA for 1996, Ellen Davis called attention to an unusual detail in the way the eyes of some figures were drawn. Some 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 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. 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 for this feature must be sought.

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 of carotenoids -- 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 and wine. A marked symptom of riboflavin deficiency is the reddening of the corneas, which, if untreated, can lead to significant ocular problems. The modern remedy for this condition is simple, however: treatment with large doses of vitamin B and carotenoids.

An occasional temporary side-effect of high carotene levels (sometimes now caused by

eating too many carrots) is a yellow skin jaundice. 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. This jaundice causes no permanent ill effects, and typically disappears when the dietary level of carotenes is reduced.

We suggest, therefore, that the frescoes are telling us that Thera women had access to large amounts of vitamin B through the saffron that they ingested at all stages in their lives, and that young boys did as well before they entered pubescence. Note that the hairstyle of the youngest boy and youngest girls are nearly identical, suggesting that prior to pubescence children form a single gender. 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 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; its use as an emmenagogue allowed women to regulate their own menses and thus afforded some control over conception. High levels of these vitamins promotes good eyesight and general health, and may reduce the risk of some cancers and retard ageing. 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 our 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 would be the first Aegean 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 which largely exclude men or show them in subordinate roles. In Xeste 3, therefore, we seem to have a building which was designed to be used by women at all stages in their lives.

It may not be a coincidence that some of the other plants represented in Xeste 3 like lilies, cystus, iris, and myrtle, also have documented medicinal properties and were associated with the rites of specific goddesses in historical times. Myrtle, for example, was specifically associated with marriage. The prevalence of these and other plants in frescoes on Thera and on Crete leads us to wonder what such landscape scenes really meant. Are they simply indicators that the Minoans were the earliest hippies or flower lovers, or might they instead illustrate one of the spheres of women's activities and powers?

Moreover, if the Thera lustral basin paintings indicate that lustral basin was for women's

rites, and if the Xeste 3 basin was used in the same way as the Cretan examples, they 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 importance of women in Minoan society.

Interestingly, no lustral basins were constructed in the mainland Greek palaces, 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 processional figures. By the historical period, women with detailed knowledge of plants and their properties were considered potential poisoners or witches (Medea), aged "wise women" who possessed extraordinary knowledge or "sight" were viewed as threatening even by the men who sought their advice (Perseus and the Graiai), and women who abandoned the constructed environment of the *polis* for mountainous landscapes were considered actively dangerous (Pentheus' experience of the maenads on Mt. Kithairon). At Athens, attempts were made by men to legislate and regulate how and when women associated with one another in the absence of men (the Thesmophoria festival) and Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousai* reflects male insecurities about the nature of the festival and what exactly went on in women's homosocial environments. In classical Greece, descriptions of the female body are often constructed in terms of the natural landscape or compared to flowers, often with a complex interweaving of images and various unfortunate outcomes. In mythology, the flowery meadow is the locus where violence and bloodshed intersected for young women (e.g., Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, or Persephone in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*). Such mythological echoes might reflect, however dimly, a period in the prehistory of Greece, where 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 frescoes cannot be construed as evidence for a matriarchy where women exercised dominant political control, it suggests that a more balanced and complementary division of women's and men's roles existed during one period of the Aegean Late Bronze Age.