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**AEGAEUM 39**

**Annales liégeoises et PASpiennes d'archéologie égéenne**

# **METAPHYSIS**

## **RITUAL, MYTH AND SYMBOLISM IN THE AEGEAN BRONZE AGE**

**Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Aegean Conference, Vienna,  
Institute for Oriental and European Archaeology,  
Aegean and Anatolia Department, Austrian Academy of Sciences  
and Institute of Classical Archaeology, University of Vienna,  
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Edited by Eva ALRAM-STERN, Fritz BLAKOLMER, Sigrid DEGER-JALKOTZY,  
Robert LAFFINEUR and Jörg WEILHARTNER

PEETERS  
LEUVEN - LIEGE  
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## IMAGES OF *PHYSIS* OR PERCEPTIONS OF *METAPHYSIS*? SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE XESTE 3 BUILDING AT AKROTIRI, THERA

In the *PHYSIS* conference of 2012 Lefteris Zorzos presented new evidence from phytoliths, showing that there has been a significant change in the climate and environment of Thera from the time before the eruption and today; I contributed to this paper by pointing that the wall paintings of Akrotiri are trustworthy witnesses in support of this observation.<sup>1</sup>

The iconography of Xeste 3 (a public building with ‘idiosyncratic’ character, most of the rooms of which are lavishly decorated with murals) encapsulates natural images in which distinct floral and faunal species are stereotypically repeated because of their strong symbolic connection to the imposing Goddess of Nature (Potnia), her acolytes and her initiate adorants.<sup>2</sup> Based on the combined evidence of the wall-paintings, architectural layout and moveable finds, the lower two storeys of Xeste 3 were apparently allocated to serve as venues for the performance of initiation rites (rites of passage) involving the young people of the Theran society, with separate rites for boys and girls conducted in spaces displaying relevant iconography.<sup>3</sup> The murals of Xeste 3 in one sense can be seen to replace, physically or metaphysically, the natural setting of Thera within the urban landscape of the town. When the island’s habitat is depicted, this is done with accuracy and liveliness, aiming to emphasize its vital role in the shaping of the community’s *sympān*, a “universe” in which the actual landscape seems to house most of the cosmological, religious and rituals beliefs of the Therans.<sup>4</sup>

Where does *Physis* stop in the Xeste 3 iconography and where does *Metaphysis* begin? Do the peopled scenes of saffron-gathering, saffron-offering and procession only depict the standard Theran environment, where the gender-and-age-differentiated rituals of the community were enacted, or are these flowery meadows perceived as the metaphysical universe where gods, acolytes, nymphs, heroes

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<sup>1</sup> “[In the iconography of Xeste 3 plants] do not appear as themes of ‘Minoan floral hybridism’ that have derived from a reservoir of ‘religious art’ but they present the dynamic and targeted reproduction of the natural physical space in which the recipients receive this imagery of ceremonial-ritual and religious *eikones*.” A. VLACHOPOULOS - L. ZORZOS, “*Physis* and *Techne* on Thera: Reconstructing Bronze Age Environment and Land-Use Based on New Evidence from Phytoliths and the Akrotiri Wall-Paintings,” in *PHYSIS*, 195.

<sup>2</sup> VLACHOPOULOS and ZORZOS (*supra* n. 1) 190, notes 46-49, 195, notes 89-91. See also A. VLACHOPOULOS, “The Wall Paintings from the Xeste 3 Building at Akrotiri, Thera: Towards an Interpretation of Its Iconographic Programme,” in N.J. BRODIE, J. DOOLE, G. GAVALAS, and C. RENFREW (eds), *Horizon. Ορίζων: A Colloquium on the Prehistory of the Cyclades* (2008) 451-465; IDEM, “L’espace rituel revisité : Architecture et iconographie dans la Xeste 3 d’Akrotiri, Théra,” in I. BOEHM and S. MÜLLER-CELKA (eds), *Espace civil, espace religieux en Égée durant la période mycénienne : approches épigraphique, linguistique et archéologique. Actes des journées d’archéologie et de philologie mycéniennes tenues à la Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée – Jean Pouilloux les 1er février 2006 et 1er mars 2007* (2010) 173-198, 223-229.

<sup>3</sup> C. DOUMAS, *The Wall Paintings of Thera* (1992) 126-175, figs 92-137; I. PAPAGEORGIOU, “Κυνηγοί στο Αιγαίο της 2ης χιλιετίας π.Χ. Προεισαγωγικές παρατηρήσεις με αφορμή δύο τοιχογραφίες από τον προθάλαμο της Ξεστής 3,” in Ch. DOUMAS (ed.), *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας 1967–2007. Σαράντα χρόνια έρευνας. Επιστημονική Διμερίδα, Αθήνα 15–16 Δεκεμβρίου 2007* (forthcoming). See also C. PALYVOU, “Wall-Paintings and Architecture in the Aegean Bronze Age,” in D. PANAGIOTOPOULOS and U. GÜNKEL-MASCHEK (eds.), *Minoan Realities* (2012) 17-24, figs 12-18.

<sup>4</sup> A. VLACHOPOULOS, “Purple rosettes” / Πορφυροί ρόδακες: New data on the polychromy of the Thera Wall-Paintings”, in R. KOEHL (ed.), *Studies in Aegean Art and Culture. A New York Aegean Bronze Age Colloquium in Memory of Ellen N. Davis* (forthcoming). See also N. MARINATOS, this volume. See also N. MARINATOS, “Spirals and Solar Symbols in Minoan and Egyptian Art”, in A.G. VLACHOPOULOS (ed.), *Paintbrushes / Χρωστικές. Wall-paintings and vase-painting of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC in dialogue. Akrotiri, Thera, 24-26 May 2013, Summaries* (2013) 32-35.



and mythical creatures emphatically project their didactic/instructive qualities to the young individuals in transitional state?

Nature is apparent everywhere but seems to be strictly differentiated for males and females (as sexes themselves are in Xeste 3).<sup>5</sup> The iconographic nuclei of the females directly refer to the flora of the island, with the flowered crocus plant being the absolute protagonist; the tufted reeds and the red lilies follow in frequency.<sup>6</sup> The faunal elements that intersect in these meadow or marshy landscapes, where only women are engaged, are all flying creatures: ducks, swallows and dragonflies.<sup>7</sup> The iconography of the males is connected with “labours” showing wild animals, such as the bull and the wild goat, being captured by pairs of young men.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to what happens in every wall-painted “female” space of the building, the “male” iconographic unit of the antechamber is set against a neutral white background and the standard natural milieu connected with such scenes is not reproduced; such choice, however, seems to have been dictated by the projected scale of the figures rather than by any intentional will to crop the habitat. The same neutral background is repeated on the second “male unit” of the naked boys in room 3B.<sup>9</sup> In this suffocating Π-shaped room, however, the iconographic desideratum is apparently the ritual enactments of the males within the space-less framed panels of the relevant walls.

Nanno Marinatos, in the opening lecture of this symposium, gave us a stimulating interpretation on the iconography of Xeste 3 and most of these murals have been commented in detail.<sup>10</sup> As we have both suggested the “Wounded Lady” depicted in the middle of the scene above the Lustral Basin (Pl. CXIVa)<sup>11</sup> might be interpreted as a *hypostasis* of the Great Goddess and I find very convincing the view that the blood dripping from her wound alludes to the red stigmas of the crocus.<sup>12</sup> An analogous version lies behind the Greek myth of the handsome youth Krokos, who was accidentally killed by his friend Hermes while playing the discus game.<sup>13</sup> The blood that dripped from his wounds coloured an anonymous plant that was given the youth’s name thereafter.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>5</sup> N. MARINATOS, “Role and Sex Division in Ritual Scenes of Aegean Art”, *Journal of Prehistoric Religion* 1 (1987) 23-34. See also J. DRIESSEN, “Chercher la femme. Identifying Minoan Gender Relations in the Built Environment,” in PANAGIOTOPOULOS and GÜNKEL-MASCHEK (*supra* n. 3) 145-147.

<sup>6</sup> A. VLACHOPOULOS, “The Reed Motif in the Thera Wall-Paintings and Its Association with Aegean Pictorial Art,” in S. SHERRATT (ed.), *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on the Wall Paintings of Thera*, *Ίδρυμα Θήρας Πέτρος Μ. Νομικός, Θήρα, Αύγουστος 1997* (2000) 631-656; VLACHOPOULOS and ZORZOS (*supra* n. 1).

<sup>7</sup> A. VLACHOPOULOS “Η ‘τοιχογραφία του Δονακώνος’ από το κτήριο Ξεστή 3 του Ακρωτηρίου,” in C. DOUMAS (ed.), *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας, 30 χρόνια έρευνας. Διεπιστημονική Συνάντηση 19-20 Δεκεμβρίου 1998* (2008) 265-289; VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2).

<sup>8</sup> PAPAGEORGIOU (*supra* n. 3). The triumphant taming of animals by two males, who compose an “ομόφυλη συντροφία”, as a ritual enactment alluding to the coming-to-age of the youths of the Aegean Bronze Age, might lie behind the later myths in which analogous labours are accomplished by young Hermes accompanied by his elder brother Apollo. See S. ILES JOHNSTON, “‘Initiation’ in Myth, ‘Initiation’ in Practice”, in D. DODD and C. FARAONE (eds), *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives. New Critical Perspectives* (2003) 155-180.

<sup>9</sup> DOUMAS (*supra* n. 3)

<sup>10</sup> MARINATOS, this volume.

<sup>11</sup> Lustral basins (the term given by A. Evans) are rectangular paved ‘pools’ – lacking a drainage system however – that are sunken to the ground floor of imposed Neopalatial buildings and reached by a few stairs. Lustral basins have been connected with female cultic activity and rituals (M. PLATONOS, “Νέες ενδείξεις για το πρόβλημα των καθαρτήριων δεξαμενών και των λουτρών στον Μινωικό κόσμο”, in *Πεπραγμένα του ΣΤ’ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου, Χανιά 24-30 Αυγούστου 1986*, A2 [1990] 41-55; DRIESSEN [*supra* n. 5] 152-153 fig. 8). The lustral basin of Xeste 3 is the only example outside Crete, see C. PALLYVOU, *Akrotiri Thera. An Architecture of Affluence 3,500 Years Old* (2005) 163 fig. 243.

<sup>12</sup> MARINATOS, this volume; N. MARINATOS, *Sir Artur Evans and Minoan Crete* (2105) 36-41 figs 10-12.

<sup>13</sup> OVID, *Metamorphoses* V, 283. See also P. GRIMAL, *A Concise Dictionary of Classical mythology* (1990) 109.

<sup>14</sup> The narrative iconography of Xeste 3 has offered the field for numerous analogies with Greek mythology, either in the sphere of myths with individual female protagonists, such as Eurydice, Persephone and

In fact, the prevailing iconographic axis dictating the rendering of this central figure is that of a bent crocus flower stem, over which the suffering woman is stepping her bleeding foot, a clear allusion to the healing-haemostatic properties of the plant.<sup>15</sup> The various qualities of saffron should count for much in our interpretations of these murals. Crocus flowers also bejewel the garments of both the Necklace Bringer and the young Veiled Girl (Pl. CXIVb), commemorating the valuable commodity that was bringing wealth to Thera<sup>16</sup>, and around the collection of which an annual (autumnal) female initiation feast was organized.

The shrine depicted on the east wall of this (architectural, functional and iconographic) unit is itself a *xeste* building, as its lateral wall clearly shows (Pl. CXIVc). The bushy olive tree emerging from the interior, compared to the females of the north wall, might indicate a scale to the actual dimensions of this construction. The determination of such a scale would be useless, however, since the whole scene does not narrate a realistic incident of individual people; in all probability behind this multi-figural mural lies an archetypical myth relating to gods and heroes performing rituals, as I have argued.<sup>17</sup> The stains of blood do not come from a sacrificed animal; the shrine is miraculously bleeding (as the Wounded Goddess is) and the young veiled girl, who is to be shortly initiated into womanhood, is ecstatically visualizing this metaphysical event.<sup>18</sup> Blood trickles down along the central wooden double panel of the gate, symmetrically aligned to that on the double horns and the lintel. Stefan Hiller correlated the spiraliform frame around the shrine's entrance with the ornamentation of the doors of various examples of cultic architecture<sup>19</sup> and Nanno Marinatos claimed that the spirals (along with the lilies) "allude to the symbols of its divine dweller"; if the spiral motif is to be connected with any such symbol, however, this discussion should wait until our ascent to the second floor of Xeste 3.

The iconography of the Crocus-gathering-and-offering Female Festival of the first floor is well known and interpretations of the reed marsh in connection with the Seated Potnia have been offered several times.<sup>20</sup> The recent reconstruction of the Five Mature Ladies who proceed along the corridor

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Artemis, or through distinct qualities of certain iconographic motifs connected with mythological cycles in their epic or lyric versions. See A. VLACHOPOULOS, "Mythos, Logos and Eikon: Motifs of Early Greek Poetry and the Wall Paintings of Xeste 3, Akrotiri," in *EPOS*, 107-117.

<sup>15</sup> VLACHOPOULOS (*supra* n. 14) 111. On the medicinal properties of saffron, see S. FERRENCE and G. BENDERSKY, "Therapy with Saffron and the Goddess at Thera," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 47 (2004) 199-226; S.Z. MOUSAVI and S.Z. BATHAIE, "Historical uses of saffron: Identifying potential new avenues for modern research", *Avicenna Journal of Phytomedicine*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2011) 57-66. On crocus in the Aegean Bronze Age iconography, see J. DAY, "Crocuses in Context. A Diachronic Survey of the Crocus Motif in the Aegean Bronze Age", *Hesperia* 80 (2011) 337-379.

<sup>16</sup> On crocus in Linear A and B scripts, see J. DAY, "Counting Threads: Saffron in Aegean Bronze Age Writing and Society," *OJA* 30 (2011) 369-391.

<sup>17</sup> VLACHOPOULOS 2007 (*supra* n. 14). See also W. BURKERT, *Αρχαία Ελληνική Θρησκεία και Τελετουργία* (1993) 69; MARINATOS 2015 (*supra* n. 12) 37, 40.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that the crucial detail of her bleeding toe is put disproportionately low on the mural of the North Wall of the "adyton", but this pictorial disadvantage is vanishing from the moment that the viewer has to stand at a considerable distance from the wall because of the lustral basin that is opened underneath. It is important to comment that for those we were stepping down the stairs of the lustral basin this detail was almost at the height of their eyes, thus even more perceivable during the enactments that were taking place in Room 3A. On the lustral basin, see PALYVOU (*supra* n. 11); C. DOUMAS, "Η θρησκεία στο Ακρωτήρι," in C. DOUMAS (ed.), *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας. Τριάντα Χρόνια Έρευνας 1967-1997* (2008) 357-357 fig. 9.

<sup>19</sup> S. HILLER, "The Spiral as a Symbol of Sovereignty and Power," in A. DAKOURI-HILD and S. SHERRATT (eds.), *AUTOCHTHON: Papers Presented to O.T.P.K. Dickinson on the Occasion of His Retirement* (2005) 259-270. On the symbolic importance of the running spirals, see also U. GÜNKEL-MASCHEK, "Spirals, Bulls, and Sacred Landscapes. The meaningful appearance of Pictorial Objects within their Spatial and Social Contexts", in PANAGIOTOPOULOS and GÜNKEL-MASCHEK (*supra* n. 3) 119-124.

<sup>20</sup> N. MARINATOS, *Art and religion in Prehistoric Thera* (1984) 61, 68 figs. 40, 49; P. REHAK, "Imag(in)ing a Women's World in Bronze Age Greece: The Frescoes from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera", in N.S.

towards the Goddess deserves some commentary because these murals add a lot to our knowledge of how “physis” was perceived by the Therans.<sup>21</sup>

A closer look at these women reveals that their “nature scene costumes” were worn more as the emphatic projection of “real life images” with strong symbolic meaning within the iconographic and ritual milieu of Xeste 3, than merely as garments of exquisite luxury.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis on individual species of flora and fauna (crocuses, lilies, roses, olive tree, flying fish, swallows) may reveal the wish of the community to convey distinct aspects of the “Potnia”, and, in that sense, the processing life-size ladies may reflect some of the multi-dimensional perceptions (υποστάσεις) of the supreme female Aegean Divinity, whose archetypical image (as Potnia) is portrayed on the north wall of the same space (Pl. CXVa).

The small internal staircase that leads to the narrow corridor of the Processing Ladies provides the only access to the second floor of Xeste 3. One could then reach this section of the building passing first through the lower storeys. Consequently, the visitor, after a multifaceted journey across multi-figured scenes showing activities of man and nature, suddenly ascended to a space devoid of gods, men, animals and plants, where repetitive colourful geometric motifs covered the walls all around, in an alternating interplay of the four primary colours against the white ground (Pl. CXVb).

The rooms of the upper storey were densely decorated but, as the architectural shell had collapsed completely, the task of conservation and restoration of the wall-paintings, as well as reconstruction of their layout, has proven to be a very difficult one, all the more so since the planning and actual dimensions of the walls are totally unknown.<sup>23</sup> Spyridon Marinatos reported that the thousands of fragments of spirals found in the upper levels of the Xeste 3 trenches were mixed with pure earth.<sup>24</sup> Could we therefore assume that the walls of the upper floor of the building were constructed of mud and timber on top of which the enormous surfaces of plaster were applied and painted? This is rather inconsistent with the architecture in Akrotiri and the structural systems that have been found till now. Stone and timber are the main structural materials, while mudbricks are used for non load bearing walls or as a filling between the timber frame of polythra.<sup>25</sup>

All of the wall-paintings in the spaces of the second storey of Xeste 3 depict exclusively polychrome geometric patterns, which are developed out of the spiral and the lozenge motif, and

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RABINOWITZ and L. AUANGER (eds), *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World* (2002) 34-59; VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2) 180-181, 183 figs. 9, 11. A recent reconsideration of ‘Potnia’ in linear B is attempted by J. O’ NEIL, “The Divinities of Linear B and Their Relationship to the Later Greek Gods”, *Pasiphae* VII (2014) 137-141.

<sup>21</sup> VLACHOPOULOS and ZORZOS (*supra* n. 1). See earlier views in P. REHAK, “The Aegean Landscape and the Body: A New Interpretation of the Thera Frescoes,” in N.L. WICKER and B. ARNOLD (eds), *From the Ground Up: Beyond Gender Theory in Archaeology. Proceedings of the Fifth Gender and Archaeology Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, October 1998* (1999) 11-22; P. REHAK, “Crocus costumes in Aegean art,” in A. CHAPIN (ed.), *XARIS. Essays in Honor of Sara A. Immerwahr* (2004) 85-100; A. CHAPIN, “Maidenhood and Marriage: The Reproductive Lives of the Girls and Women from Xeste 3, Thera,” *Aegean Archaeology* 4 (1997-2000) 7-25.

<sup>22</sup> VLACHOPOULOS and ZORZOS (*supra* n. 1). See also I. PAPAGEORGIOU, “The Practice of Bird Hunting in the Aegean of the Second Millennium BC: An Investigation”, *BSA* 109 (2014) 111-128.

<sup>23</sup> VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>24</sup> S. Marinatos’ personal notebook of the years 1973, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> On the use of timber in Xeste 3, see C. PALYVOU, *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας. Η οικοδομική τεχνική* (1999) 176-179, fig. 85, 350-361 figs. 191-196; PALYVOU (*supra* n. 11) 181-182; E. TSAKANIKΑ-THEOHARI, *Ο δομικός ρόλος του ξύλου στην τοιχοποιία των ανακτορικού τύπου κτηρίων της Μινωικής Κρήτης*, Ph.D. diss. NTUA, Athens (2006) 237-241; E. TSAKANIKΑ-THEOHARI, “The constructional analysis of timber load bearing systems as a tool for interpreting Aegean Bronze Age architecture”, in WEILHEIM (ed.), *Proceedings of the Symposium ‘Bronze Age Architectural Traditions in the Eastern Mediterranean: Diffusion and Diversity’, 07.-08.05.2008 in Munich, Verein zur Förderung der Aufarbeitung der Hellenischen Geschichte* (2009) 131. See also, E. TSAKANIKΑ, C. PALYVOU and P. TOULIATOS, “Ο δομικός ρόλος του ξύλου στη Νεοανακτορική Αρχιτεκτονική της Μινωικής Κρήτης”, *Πεπραγμένα του Ι’ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου, Χανιά 2006, A2* (1990) 195-214.

which attest to the high level of accuracy of the Theran craftsmen.<sup>26</sup> The north external wall of the eastern section (the one above the “Adorants” and the “Potnia”) was decorated with a composition of blue spirals with red dots, which generate cordiform motifs resembling enormous pairs of ‘eyes’ set against a red background (Pl. CXVIa-b). Its monumental dimensions (length 5.10 m. and height 3.08 m.) are unparalleled by any other wall-painting at Akrotiri and show that (at least) this section of the second storey of the building was considerably higher (c. 3.30m.) than the first and ground storey (est. 2,60m. and 2,80m. respectively), projecting as a kind of ‘gallery’. A wall-painting of analogous length, featuring contrasting-coloured (red) spirals (Pl. CXVIc-d), covered the south wall of this large space, in the interior of which a system of pier-and-door partitions (*polythyra*) should be envisaged, with comparable decoration of overlying friezes.<sup>27</sup>

This space, conventionally named “the Room of the Spirals”, consists of window-less murals where enormous spirals (0.70m in diameter each) are contoured by a continuous linear outline, along which densely equidistant red or yellow dots give the illusion of continuous and rhythmic motion.<sup>28</sup> Once the spectator’s eye has spirally followed this sinuous itinerary, it is with the rosettes that the visual journey comes to an end. The spirals encompass symmetrically, in a zig-zag, the monochrome lozenges against which the 16-petalled rosettes are contrasted; their rhythmical repetition underpins the reproduction of the whole motif (Pl. CXVIIa).

Above the blue spirals of the north wall is a frieze of identical, horizontally running, spiraliform half-sized motifs. This upper zone conducts the spectator’s eye to a left-to-right reading, until it meets the identical friezes that decorate the narrow spaces above the pier and door partitions that are expected to divide this ample space. No murals have been attributed to the long east external wall (east façade) of this floor (Pl. CXVIIb).

The confronting identical but antichrome large spirals engage the north and south walls of this section in a visual, chromatic and functional dialogue<sup>29</sup>, leaving no room for openings on either of the upper floor facades of the building (Pl. CXVIIc). The red spirals on the south wall, however, measure only 2.80m. in height, implying either the installation of a long fanlight through which the southerly wind might enter the floor, or a much lower height for the southern space of “the Room of the Spirals”. Of the same height is also a second section of mural, depicting a complete red spiral, which is tentatively assigned to the right or left side of the south wall.<sup>30</sup> No friezes of lesser red spirals have been identified, opening up the possibility that the south and north section of this space were of unequal height.

The communication of the “Room of the Spirals” with the western section of this floor was through the corridor that, in turn, was accessed by the small staircase of the building. At least two sections of wall-paintings come from this poorly known space, which corresponds to Room 9 of the lower storeys; they all depict groups of 16-petalled blue and purple or grey rosettes symmetrically arranged / bunched by four and framed with an elegant undulating relief lozenge, against a red background.<sup>31</sup> The astonishingly well preserved larger section<sup>32</sup>, originally characterized by Marinatos

<sup>26</sup> C. PAPAODYSSEUS, Th. PANAGOPOULOS, M. EXARHOS, C. TRIANTAFYLLOU, G. ROUSSOPOULOS, P. ROUSSOPOULOS, D. FRAGOULIS, G. GALANOPOULOS, A. VLACHOPOULOS, C. DOUMAS, “Distinct Late Bronze Age (c. 1650 BC) Wall Paintings of Akrotiri, Thera Comprising Advanced Geometrical Patterns”, *Archaeometry* 48 (2006) 97-114.

<sup>27</sup> VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2). On the system of the polythyra in Xeste 3, see PALYVOU 1999 (*supra* n. 25); PALYVOU (*supra* n. 11) 54-62 figs 62-75, 144-145 figs. 212-215.

<sup>28</sup> N. SEPETZOGLOU, “The role and significance of Colour in the Large Wall-Paintings of Spirals from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri”, in VLACHOPOULOS 2013 (*supra* n. 4) 147-151.

<sup>29</sup> As N. SEPETZOGLOU (*supra* n. 28, 151 fig. 5) puts it, “the changes of coloration observed between the two large compositions apparently have a subversive effect of perception”; VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>30</sup> MARINATOS (*supra* n. 4) fig. 1.

<sup>31</sup> VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>32</sup> DOUMAS (*supra* n. 3) 131 fig. 136-137; VLACHOPOULOS 2008 (*supra* n. 2) 454 fig. 41, 46a.



as “a genuine work of art imitating ivory carving”<sup>33</sup>, has, as do all the spiral murals described so far, even and thick upper and lateral edges, clearly showing that this mural was also executed within wooden beams (Pl. CXVIIIa). A second mural of identical decoration probably expanded this motif on the west wall.<sup>34</sup> Since stone bases of polythyra have been found to the south of the “Relief Lozenges” compartment (Rooms 9-10 and 10-13 or 13-14 of the lower floors), we can assume that at least one internal partition wall divided the space, in an analogous arrangement as has been hypothesized in the “Room of the Spirals”.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that the wall-paintings of the blue and red spirals extend across uninterrupted surfaces without windows strongly suggests that this space had only a few openings. After the full study of the material, it will perhaps be established that the initial picture of the upper storey of Xeste 3 was that of an introverted and closed apartment with impressive but, at the same time, overwhelming mural compositions, probably illumined by artificial rather than natural light. The large number of stone and clay lamps found in Xeste 3 testifies to the vital role that artificial light played in the functions of the building and suggests that the circulation of people and their vision of the wall-paintings was to a high degree perceived as a complicated emotional and sensual experience.<sup>36</sup>

For whom, we wonder, had this ‘iconoclastic’ world of masterfully drawn – yet frightening in its aspect – geometry been constructed?

In every initiatory / coming-to-age procedure, as documented by ethnographic parallels and confirmed by ancient Greek literary sources<sup>37</sup>, an important stage of initiation is that of the initiate’s isolation or separation, which signals his/her loss of identity and involves a metaphorical ‘death’.<sup>38</sup> If Xeste 3 was (as has been unanimously accepted) a public building for puberty rituals, accommodating the performances of the natural and metaphysical environment in the wall-paintings of its two storeys, once again through the mural decoration and its architectural shell, would have created the necessary space for the total or controlled isolation of the person undergoing initiation.

With an estimated surface of c. 80-100 s.m. mural coverage and an internal division into two major spaces, conventionally named “the Room of the Spirals” and “the Room of the Lozenges”, this “aniconic spiraliform world” of the upper storey of the building conforms ideally to a space reserved for the stage of isolation of the youths awaiting their coming-to-age initiation. By accepting that separation and isolation was the first step in such rites of passage we must presuppose that, functionally, the second floor of Xeste 3 was intended to operate as the starting point of this corporal and visual process for the young initiate(s). This assumption, however, presupposes an odd system of circulation into the ground floor of Xeste 3, through the waiting hall of the building, the central Room 4 (which had been intentionally left white-plastered), and ending to the corridor that was leading to the small staircase.

Considering that the iconography of the lower floors exhausts *physis* through the perception of nature as idiosyncratic riparian, aquatic and mountainous landscapes in which males and females are depicted carrying out primordial-paradigmatic activities, the second floor of Xeste 3 stands out in absolute contradiction. Being architecturally and visually metaphysical in concept, the magnificent non-figural upper floor was meant to transfer the persons involved in the functions (*λειτουργίες*) of Xeste

<sup>33</sup> S. MARINATOS *Excavations at Thera VII* (1976) 27 pl. 41a-b.

<sup>34</sup> C. DOUMAS, M. MARTHARI, C. TELEVANTOU, *Museum of Prehistoric Thera: Brief Guide* (2000) 36 fig. 32; VLACHOPOULOS 2008 (*supra* n. 2) 454 fig. 41, 46b; VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>35</sup> PALLYVOU 1999 (*supra* n. 25) 352; A. MICHAÏLIDOU, *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας. Η μελέτη των ορόφων στα κτήρια του οικισμού* (2001) 343, 360 fig. 269; VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2) 185.

<sup>36</sup> MARINATOS (*supra* n. 33) 31 pl. 54a-b, 55 a; VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2) 186-188.

<sup>37</sup> W. BURKERT, *Savage Energies: Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (2001) 47. See also F. GRAF, “Initiation: a concept with a troubled history”, in D. DODD and C. FARAONE, *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives. New Critical Perspectives* (2003) 9-10, 14-15, 17, 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> A. VAN GENNEPP, *Les rites de passage* (1909). See also V. TURNER, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage”, in *The Forest of Symbols* (1967); A. SZAKOLCZAI, *Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events* (2009) 147.

3 into a deliberately impressive and oppressive world of absolute symmetry, where mental reactions are stronger than visual ones.

Colours on the upper floor wall-paintings are stereotypically repeated: red, blue, yellow and black against the white background of the polished lime plaster. Purple pigment was extensively applied on the Relief Lozenges, making some of their rosettes lavishly shine (Pl. CXVIIIb). Egyptian blue was densely used in all the compositions of that floor. By implementing the recently developed non-invasive imaging method of infrared photoluminescence we were able to detect the frequent occurrence of 'Egyptian blue' in Xeste 3.<sup>39</sup> The first conclusions from the measurements and the analyses of this pigment at Akrotiri tend to show its selective application on the basis of the optimal technical achievement of the aesthetically and chromatically desired tone. The ample use of Egyptian blue on all of the murals described above testifies to the technological and chromatic superiority of these paintings. Modern physics insist that Egyptian blue does not shine to the naked eye, thus excluding the possibility that this pigment's visual effect on the huge spirals of Xeste 3 might give a result similar to the image of Pl. CXVIIIc.<sup>40</sup> Despite this visual restriction, the vision of the upper floor's gigantic geometry was breathtaking, illusionistic, dazzling and hypnotic, if not psychotropic.<sup>41</sup>

N. Marinatos, following the opinion of most Egyptologists, interprets the rosette as a stellar body and suggests that the entire iconographical program of the upper floor of Xeste 3 constitutes a celestial vision.<sup>42</sup> If we assume that the sun is depicted on the dotted circles and that stars are rendered as equidistant dots on the Xeste 3 murals, then we have to admit that these celestial bodies can be rendered (and perceived) in different, non conventional colours, following the principles of antichromy observed on the spirals.<sup>43</sup>

In my opinion, the ivy-leaf spirals look more like frightening imaginary creatures than images recalling the majestic serenity of the celestial dome. Deliberately or not, these gigantic spiral-shaped pairs of ecstatically gazing eyes strongly evoke the sense of movement.<sup>44</sup> Such painting is often called

<sup>39</sup> A. VLACHOPOULOS and S. SOTIROPOULOU, "Blue Pigments on the Thera Wall Paintings: from the palette of the Theran painter to the laboratory analysis", *Talanta* 44 (2012) 245- 272.

<sup>40</sup> The human eye can't see infrared light, because like X-rays and radio waves, infrared light waves are outside the visual spectrum. Scientists at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, however, have found that under certain conditions, the retina can sense infrared light after all. See Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) Online Early Edition <http://news.wustl.edu/news/Pages/27742.aspx>.

<sup>41</sup> On an analysis of hallucination and psychedelic phenomena examined by the Psychedelic Information Theory, see J. KENT, *Psychedelic Information Theory: Shamanism in the Age of Reason* (2010).

<sup>42</sup> MARINATOS, this volume. The discussion of whether a solar deity hints behind the early figurative art of the Cyclades was opened by C. ZERVOS (*L'art des Cyclades* [1957] 258) while discussing the 'solar discs' on the famous silver diadem from Chalandriani, Syros, dated to the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. The discussion was transferred soon to some later (Middle Cycladic) radiating or rosette-like motifs that appear on pictorial vases from Phylakopi and Akrotiri, and which have been interpreted as reminiscent of the sun. See L. GOODISON, "Death, Women, and the Sun: Symbolism of Regeneration in Early Aegean Religion", *Institute of Classical Studies Bulletin Supplement* 53 (1989) 11-20 figs. 12-42; EADEM, "Horizon and Body: Some Aspects of Cycladic Symbolism", in BRODIE *et al.* (*supra* n. 2) 418, 421, 427 fig. 39.2, 39.5. A. PAPAGIANNPOULOU suggested a bird sun-cult lies behind the iconography of MC pottery of Thera (A. PAPAGIANNPOULOU, "From Pots to Pictures: Middle Cycladic Figurative Art from Akrotiri, Thera", in BRODIE *et al.* [*supra* n. 2] 443-444 figs. 40.14-21). See also R.L.N. BARBER, "Subject and setting: early representational motifs on pottery from Phylakopi (EC IIIB – MC) and their relevance to fresco scenes", in A. VLACHOPOULOS (ed.), *ΧΡΩΣΤΗΡΕΣ. Η Τοιχογραφία και η Αγγειογραφία της 2ης χιλιετίας π.Χ. σε Διάλογο / PAINTBRUSHES. Wall-Painting and Vase-Painting of the 2nd Millennium BCE in Dialogue. Conference held at Akrotiri, Thera, 24.-26.5.2013* (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> On the principle of 'color-contrast' on the Thera wall paintings, see VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>44</sup> SEPETZOGLU (*supra* n. 28, 148) correctly comments that "the symmetrical development of the motif, the rotation and the magnification of it, impact a "kaleidoscopic" character to the whole. The sense of infinite performance".

psychedelic or psychotropic<sup>45</sup> effectuated through the consumption of substances that are also called psychedelic or hallucinogenic. Substances of this kind (*παρασθησιογόνα* in Greek)<sup>46</sup> are linked with ancient rituals, such as the Eleusinian mysteries<sup>47</sup>, or with the oracular prophecies of the priestess Pythia at Delphi.<sup>48</sup> The production and consumption of opium, however, has been hypothesized since the Late Bronze Age.<sup>49</sup>

Among the substances that have been examined for hallucinogenic effect is crocus, modern saffron, following authors of the ancient world who had already warned that too high a dosage of saffron could cause serious symptoms of empoisoning or even death.<sup>50</sup> Newly discovered sources demonstrate that the intake of saffron affects the body in a complex manner, as it not only builds on the sensorials but surpasses them: as a tonic, mood elevator, antidepressant, and hallucinogenic drug, saffron could be used to achieve various altered perceptions ranging from heightened sensitivity to states of trance.<sup>51</sup> However, there is still very little documentation of these hypothesized effects.

As yet the psychotropic properties of crocus cannot be proven nor can we argue that its consumption inside Xeste 3 was connected with the mode by which wall-paintings depicting spirals and rosettes were viewed. Nonetheless, the themes, scale and colour range of the wall-paintings *per se* dominated the particularly distinctive space they decorated and, surely, evoked hallucinational and phobic visual impressions, especially so if the occupants of the room were children.<sup>52</sup> Whether these spirals were perceived as imaginary beings that recalled gigantic octopuses or other tentacled creatures moving into a fantastic seabed, or as sparkling stars in a celestial *sympán*, where numerous suns shined in a supernatural dimension, the “chromatic geometry” of these paintings might have transubstantiated certain vital metaphysical desiderata of the Theran society.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>45</sup> The term “psychotropic” refers to every incentive affecting the mind, mood and other mental processes. On the optical properties of the Xeste 3 wall paintings that depict spirals, rosettes and lozenges, see VLACHOPOULOS forthcoming (*supra* n. 4).

<sup>46</sup> E. VIVLIODETIS and M. GIANNOPOULOU, “Various Medicines in a Variety of Vessels”, in N. STAMPOLIDIS and Y. TASSOULAS (eds), *Hygieia. Health, Illness, Treatment from Homer to Galen* (2014) 51.

<sup>47</sup> P. WEBSTER *et al.*, “Mixing the Kykeon”, in *ELEUSIS: Journal of Psychoactive Plants and Compounds* New Series 4 (2000).

<sup>48</sup> J.Z. DE BOER *et al.*, “New evidence for the geological origins of the ancient Delphic oracle (Greece)”, *Geology* 29 no. 8 (2001) 707-710. On the Delphic oracle and the use of “laurel” by Pythia, see a recent study by H. HARRISSIS, “A bittersweet story: the true nature of the ‘laurel’ of the oracle of Delphi”, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 57.3 (2014) 351-360.

<sup>49</sup> R. MERRILLEES, “Opium trade in the Bronze Age Levant”, *Antiquity* 36 (1962) 287-292; R. MERRILLEES, “Opium Again in Antiquity”, *Levant* 11 (1979) 167-171. Opium poppy contains many narcotics, among which the one with strong hallucinogenic properties is morphine. On psychotropic drugs in ancient civilizations, see R.J. MILLER, *Drugged: The Science and Culture Behind Psychotropic Drugs* (2014) 4-6; J. GOODMAN, A. SHERRATT and P.E. LOVEJOY (eds), *Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology* (2007).

<sup>50</sup> For detailed bibliography on the qualities of saffron, see REHAK (*supra* n. 20) 47-50.

<sup>51</sup> K. VIJAYA BHARGAVA, “Medicinal uses and Pharmacological Properties of *Crocus Sativus* Linn (Saffron)”, *International Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences*, 3 Suppl 3 (2011) 22-26; W. SCHIER, “Probing the Mystery of the Use of Saffron in Medieval Nunneries,” in R. NEWHAUSER and C. SCHLEIF (eds), *Pleasure and Danger in Perception. The Senses in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, The Senses and Society* 5 (2010) 57-72.

<sup>52</sup> SEPETZOGLU (*supra* n. 28) 147: “The initial impression created by the large wall-painting compositions of spirals is that they constituted a visual experience embodied in the space and in which colour played the leading role”.

<sup>53</sup> In his classic study on the spiral motif (Th. COOK, *The curves of Life being an Account of spiral Formations and their Application to Growth in Nature, to Science and to Art* [1914]) Cook attempted a thorough interdisciplinary examination of the spiral in history, in nature and through the sciences. Focusing also in the ‘Minoan Age’, much before the publication of the “Palace of Minos” (1921-1935), this eminent scholar pointed to “the logarithmic spiral as an abstract conception of perfect growth” (407-432).

The term “metaphysical” alludes to the existential quests and anxieties about the meaning of life that human nature faces diachronically. These are constantly integrated into the religious system that each community shapes and develops. Art usually echoes the metaphysical agonies of human beings through apocalyptic individual symbols or through a developed allegoric narrative.

Seeking to interpret the perceptions of the Minoans for the underworld, Evans thought he deciphered their vision of the Elysian immortality through the iconography of the “Ring of Nestor”.<sup>54</sup> Similar approaches by the same scholar refer to other pictorial symbols on the Knossian wall-paintings and artefacts, such as the butterflies, the chrysalis and the flying fish.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, the combination of spirals and rosettes as non-figural representation of the starry sky applied on ceilings, logically alludes to a cosmological perception of the palatial space as a whole universe.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the best example that verifies the assumption that rosettes and spirals rendered the celestial *cosmos* of the Aegeans is the magnificent stone relief ceiling of the lateral room in the Minyas’ tholos tomb at Orchomenos.<sup>57</sup> The story, however, goes a long way back in time, as early as the Final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age rock art of the Cyclades, symbolizing perpetual motion as a driving force in the prehistoric islander’s thought.<sup>58</sup>

### Some concluding thoughts

Is the “anthropomorphic iconography” of the lower floors of Xeste 3 in hermeneutic contradiction to the “non-figural” iconography of the upper floor, or is this aniconic but emblematic space complementary to the Late Bronze Age Aegeans’ perception of *Metaphysis*?

The upper floor of Xeste 3 constitutes the sheltering sky of a public building where rites of passage were enacted or taught in the presence of the divine. Allegory, mythology and rituals seem to be inextricably linked with the natural world depicted on the ground and the first floor, but the uppermost “cosmological” gallery of the building may have been restricted to a distinct, yet unknown, initiation grade, possibly to youths in the liminal stage.

The Early Cycladic II marble *phiale*, a huge shallow plate of 72.5 cm diameter, made of fine white marble, is the only movable find from Xeste 3 that can be securely ascribed to the second floor

<sup>54</sup> A. EVANS, “The Ring of Nestor”, *JHS* 45, Part I (1925) 46; *CMS* VI 2, 448-449, no. 277. See also MARINATOS 2015 (*supra* n. 12) 81.

<sup>55</sup> EVANS, *PM* II 514; *PM* III 69 (butterfly on the Priest King), *PM* II 786 (Elysian background of the Priest King); *PM* II 789, 149-151, 154 (butterflies as symbols of human souls), *PM* III 141-142, 151-152 (chrysalis as symbol of resurgence), *PM* I 521; *PM* II 453; *PM* III 127-129 (flying fish). On the Ring of Nestor, see EVANS, *PM* III 145-157 figs 94-104 pl. XXA. On the ‘Elysian’ version of the Priest King with a butterfly, see MARINATOS 2015 (*supra* n. 12) 85.

<sup>56</sup> EVANS, *PM* I 517; III 30 fig. 15; MARINATOS 2013 (*supra* n. 4). On the spirals among the ‘Minoan’ ornamental motifs in Egyptian tomb paintings, see A. KARETSOU and M. ANDRADAKI-VLAZAKI (eds.), *Κρήτη-Αίγυπτος. Πολιτισμικοί δεσμοί τριών χιλιετιών. Κατάλογος* (2000) 294-295 nos 289a-b; M. BIETAK, “The Impact of Minoan Art on Egypt: A Glimpse of Palatial Art from the Naval Base of Peru-nefer at Avaris”, in J. ARUZ, S. GRAFF and Y. RAKIC (eds), *Cultures in Contact. From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.* (2013) 197 fig. 13.

<sup>57</sup> EVANS, *PM* I 517; *PM* IV 242.

<sup>58</sup> Spirals of many types and rosette-like motifs appear on rock carvings on the Final Neolithic settlement of Strophilas on Andros and the EC sites of Korphi t’Aroniou on Naxos, many locations on Herakleia and Vathy on Astypalaia. See C. DOUMAS, “Κορφή τ’Αρωνιού», *ArchDeltion* 20 A 41-64; C. TELEVANTOU, “Strophilas. A Neolithic Settlement on Andros”, in BRODIE *et al.* (*supra* n. 2) 46-50 figs. 6.8-6.10; C. KANAKIS, “Οι επίκρουστες σπείρες της Ηρακλείας”, *Αρχαιολογία και Τέχνες* 114 (2010) 76-82; A. VLACHOPOULOS, “Archaeological Fieldwork at Vathy, Astypalaia”, in M. ALVANOU (ed.), *Island Identities, Sectetariat General for the Aegean and Island Policy, Mytilene* (2013) 51-52; A. VLACHOPOULOS and A. MATTHAIΟΥ, “Νεώτερα Αρχαιολογικά Αστυπάλαιας”, *ΗΟΡΟΣ* 22-25, (2010-2013) 375-378 fig. 6.



(Room 10).<sup>59</sup> This precious heirloom, made a thousand years before the time of Xeste 3<sup>60</sup>, offers a complementary hint towards the rituals that were performed up there, transferring every further hypothesis in the sphere of metaphysics.

Andreas G. VLACHOPOULOS

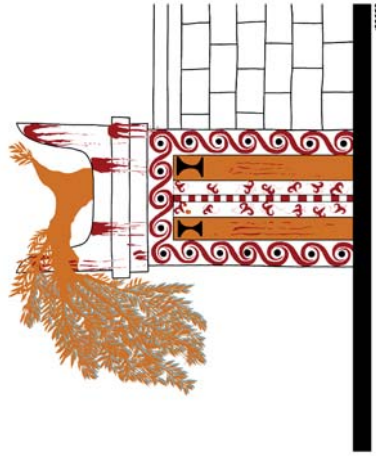
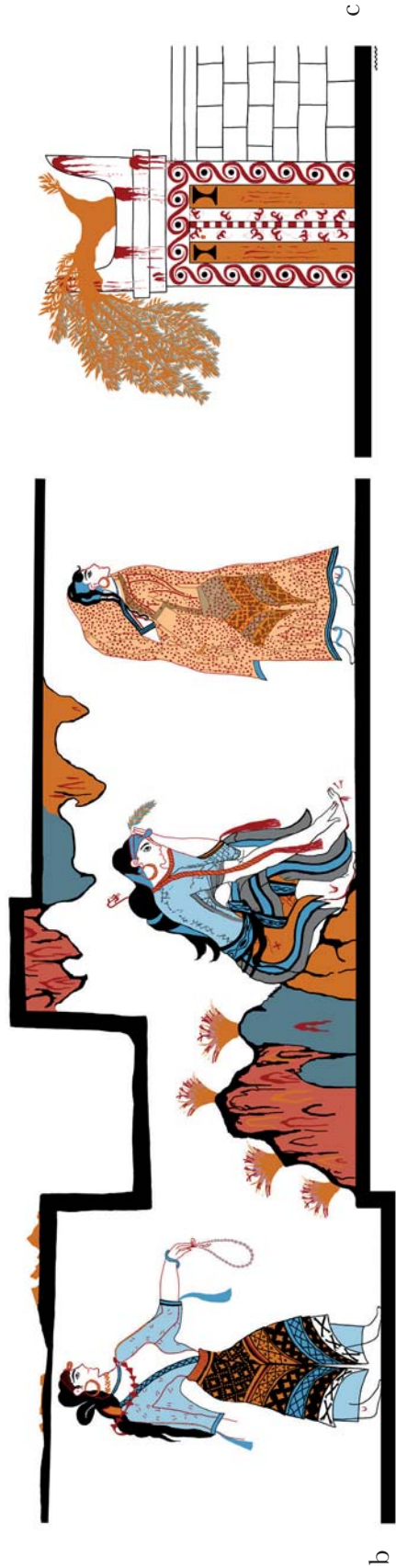
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<sup>59</sup> A. DEVETZI, “Akrotiri, Thera: Stone vessels and implements of the Early Bronze Age – A preliminary report”, in BRODIE *et al.* (*supra* n. 2) 136 figs. 15.4, 15.16; VLACHOPOULOS 2010 (*supra* n. 2) 186-187.

<sup>60</sup> The “functional status” of the EC II marble *phiale* in the LC I horizon of Xeste 3 should be stressed as unique at Akrotiri, where all Early Cycladic findings have been connected with the EBA horizon of the settlement. It is important to comment, however, that during the last phase of the Cycladic town an EC II sacrificial complex was visible on a terrace of the ‘Cenotaph Square’, which for the LC inhabitants of the city consisted a sacred area, possibly a monument “of respect or veneration for the ancestors” (C. DOUMAS, “Chambers of Mystery”, in BRODIE *et al.* [*supra* n. 2] 165-166, 170-172 figs. 17.2-17.8, 17.12-17.18).

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- Pl. CXVa Akrotiri, Xeste 3, first floor, Room 3. The Crocus-gathering-and-offering scene. Drawing by Nikos Sepetzoglou.
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a



b

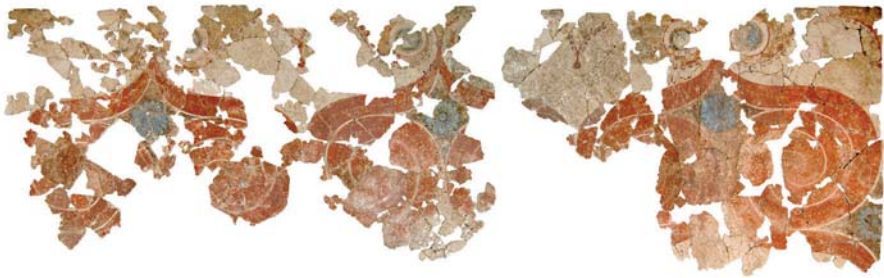




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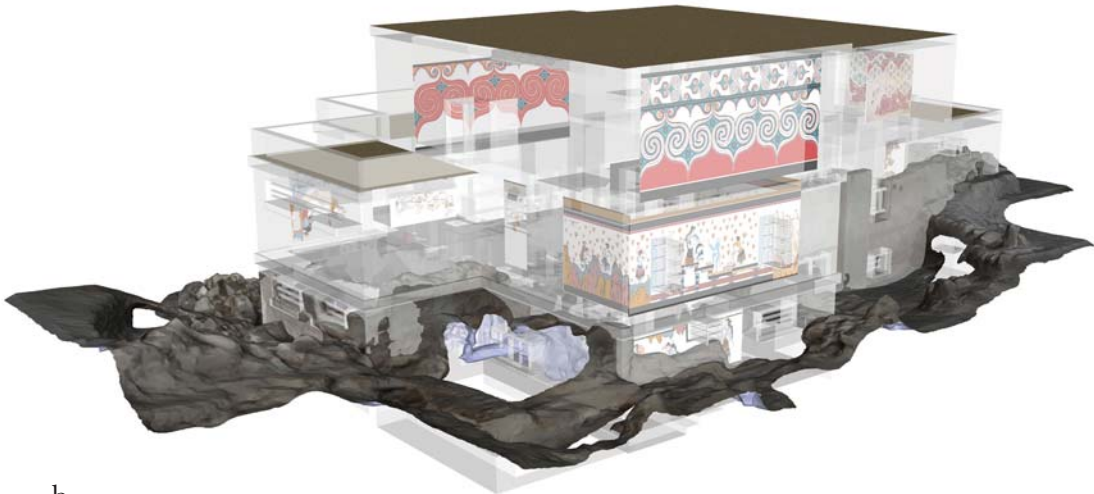
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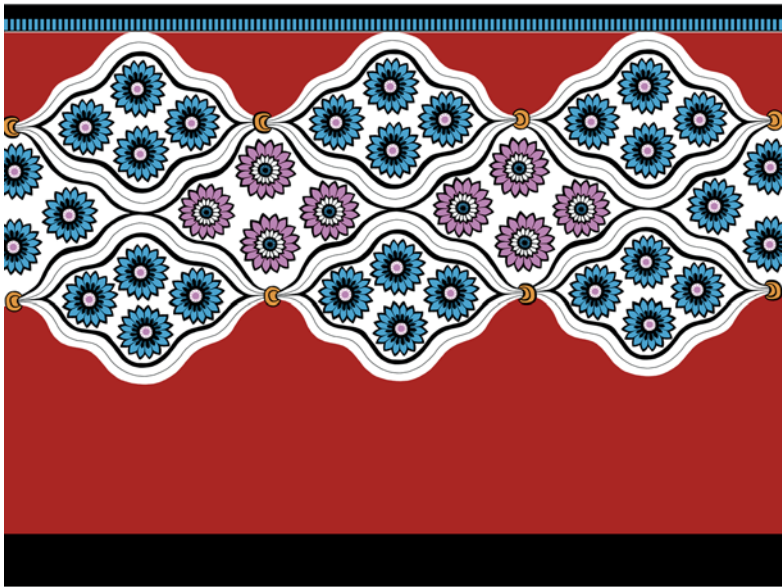


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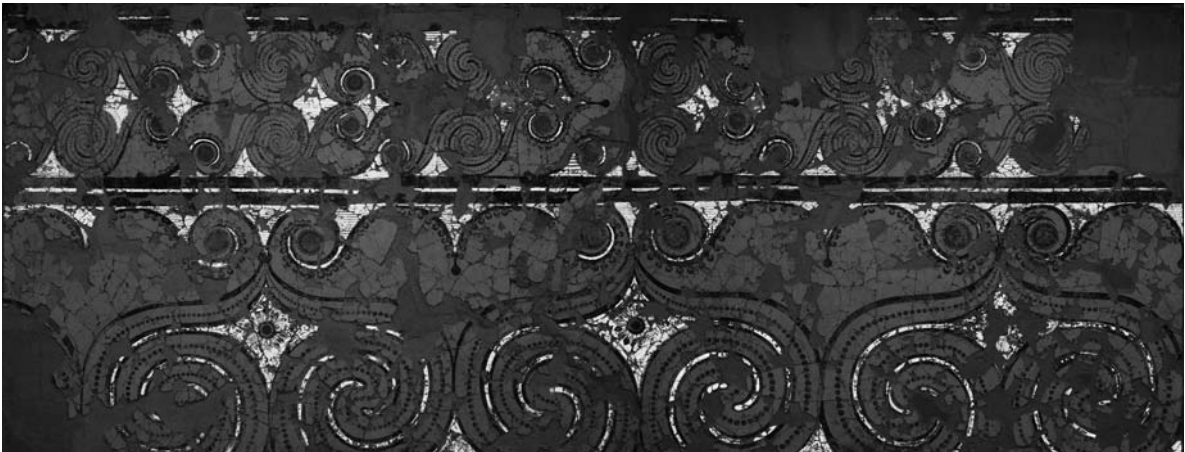




a



b



c