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## Chapter 41

# The Wall Paintings from the Xeste 3 Building at Akrotiri: Towards an Interpretation of the Iconographic Programme

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Xeste 3 stands in the southwest part of the excavated settlement of Akrotiri, close to where the port quay is thought to have been. The building had 15 rooms on each of its first two floors, but the part of the building around the service staircase was three storeys high (Fig. 41.1). This monumental building, with its impressive façades, stone benches, grand staircase, lustral basin and extensive use of polythyra around large rooms, has produced the largest assemblage of wall paintings so far found at Akrotiri.<sup>1</sup>

It appears that architecturally and iconographically, Xeste 3 is divided on the ground and the first floors into eastern and western sections, with the former interpreted primarily as a public and ceremonial area (Fig. 41.2). In contrast, the latter consisted of smaller rooms and was decorated with less sophisticated wall paintings; it seems to have served as a service area.

### Ground floor

The entrance of Xeste 3 led into a paved vestibule (Room 5), flanked by stone benches, which gave access to a stairway to the upper floor. Preserved *in situ* on the south wall of the vestibule and facing the entrance was a male figure wearing a white, triangular loincloth and white boots, his knees flexed (Fig. 41.3). The ongoing restoration shows that he is holding a rope with which he is capturing a young bull by the horns (Figs. 41.4, 41.5). A second male figure covered the south face of the mudbrick wall that divided the vestibule from Room 4. He faces left, his black hair reaching his ears in a v-shaped coiffure, and he wears a bell-shaped, fringed loincloth and boots (Fig. 41.6). The man is shown rushing at and leaping over the back of a goat, grasping it by its yellow horns.<sup>2</sup>

The presence of at least two, life-size, adult hunters or athletes in the vestibule, engaged in capturing animals (perhaps a form of animal sacrifice), intro-

duces visitors to the building to the iconographic and ritual importance of Xeste 3, since the first paintings already point to an emblematic, pictorial cycle glorifying human power over the animal kingdom.

From Room 2 comes a large wall painting depicting two palm trees with dense, blue branches arranged symmetrically at the edges of the composition (Fig. 41.7). The palm trees grow out of a sandy landscape with colourful rocks. To the right, a lion is depicted attacking a small goat or antelope (Figs. 41.8, 41.9). Up high, and in between the branches, a red dragonfly and a blue duck(?) fly to the left. In this subtropical, natural setting the human figure is absent but the hierarchy of power in the animal kingdom becomes apparent in the depiction of both predators and prey.

Room 4 had all its walls white plastered but not painted (Figs. 41.1, 41.2). In contrast, the spacious Room 3 was divided at ground level into two smaller areas, Rooms 3a and 3b, that include a lustral basin, adorned with rich paintings both on the north and the east walls. Depicted on the east wall was the monumental, ashlar façade of an altar or a shrine, surmounted by horns of consecration (Fig. 41.10). The door is decorated with spirals on the frame and red lilies on its main surface. From the tips of the horns drip drops of blood. Between the horns grows an olive(?) tree, its bushy branches bending to the left and covering one of the horns (Fig. 41.11). The dripping blood probably alludes to a sacrifice but, if so, the victim is not depicted.

Three women depicted on the north wall and over the lustral basin, conventionally named 'adorants', are clearly related to the altar. These figures are evenly distributed on the painting, with the position of each one being on the same axis as the door of each polythyron. The young girl on the right is draped in a diaphanous stippled veil. She looks behind her, towards the altar, standing on tiptoe, in a pose suggestive of dance. Crocus flowers are

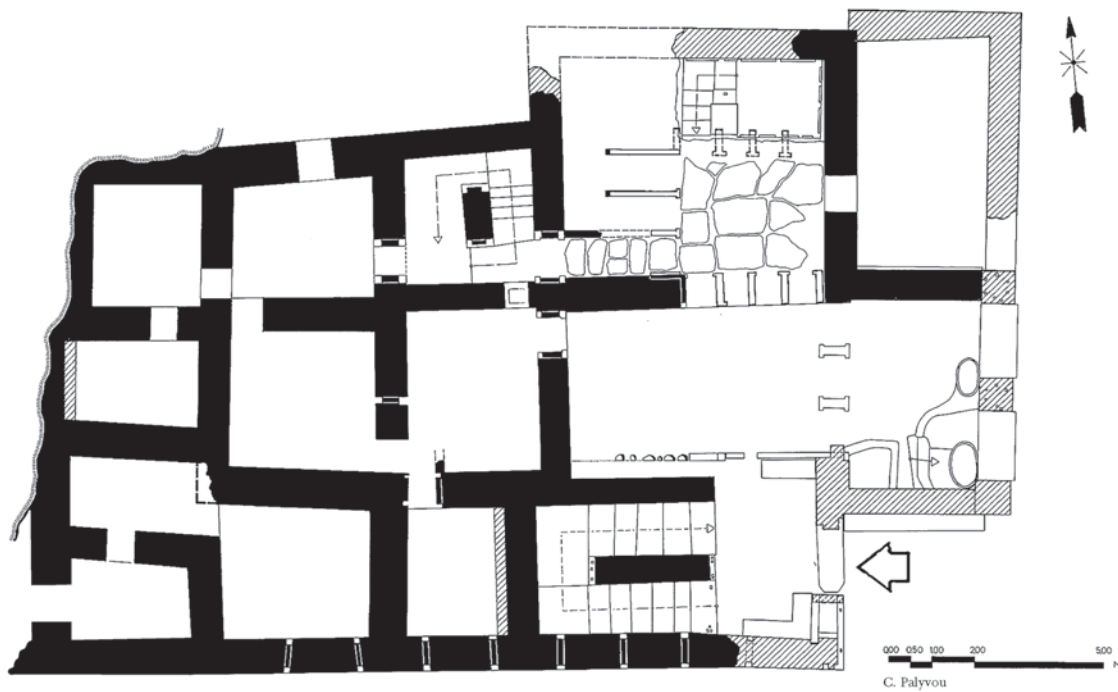


Figure 41.1. *Caption??*.

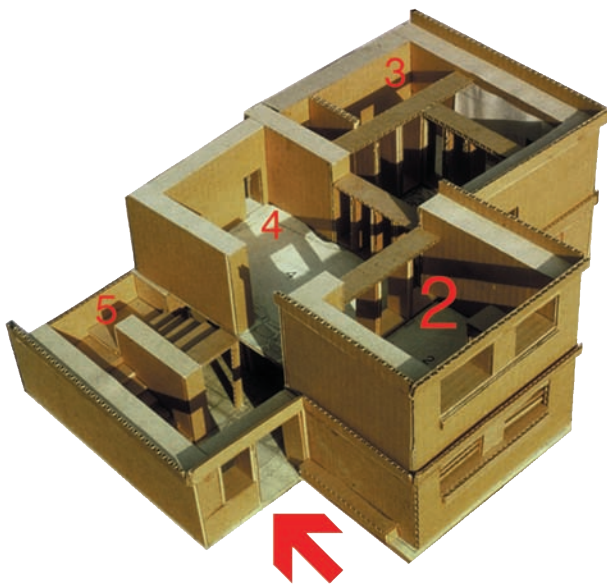


Figure 41.2. *Caption??*.

embroidered on her sleeved bodice and another crocus covers a part of her cheek. The lavishly dressed woman in the centre is seated on a crocus-studded knoll, with one hand reaching to her bleeding, left foot and the other touching her head in a gesture of pain. Her wounded foot steps on a crocus flower,

as if in the hope that its curative properties will heal the wound. The olive twig upon her head has obviously been cut from the altar. Approaching her from the left is a third woman, holding a necklace. Her diaphanous sleeved bodice is embroidered with crocus flowers and her necklace seems to be made of crocus stamens.

The western part of Room 3 was divided into three corridors by mudbrick walls. The west wall and the south and north mudbrick walls formed a  $\Pi$ -shaped space that was covered with three panels depicting four male figures participating in some kind of ceremony. Three of them are naked youths of different ages, with shaven heads. They proceed towards a seated, mature man who is clad in a white loincloth and is about to pour out the contents of a bronze hydria. Two of the boys carry vessels, while the third holds a colourful cloth and turns his head backwards.

The fact that different sectors of the building are devoted to activities involving figures of different gender is very important and suggests that men and women performed rites separately. In the case of the paintings around the adyton, it is generally accepted that the paintings tell of initiation rituals prevalent in LBA Thera. Some theories have it that there is an innuendo of marriage in these scenes and that, therefore, these rites might refer to a pre-nuptial initiation, one just preceding initiation to adulthood.

## The Grand Staircase

The Grand Staircase was adorned with wall paintings depicting a colourful mountainous landscape with miniature blossoming trees and flowers that sprout against the white background (Figs. 41.12–41.14). The absence of human figures from this naturalistic setting iconographically reflects the differentiation in function between the ground and the first floor of Xeste 3. The steep mountains symbolically transfer the visitor to another landscape, much higher than that of the ground floor and possibly unattainable for most people.

## First floor

On the first floor, the polythyra again created large and smaller compartments. In Room 2, the narrow friezes above the polythyra depicted swallows catching red dragonflies and feeding their young in the nests (Figs. 41.15, 41.16). Clusters of blossoming crocus are shown growing out the colourful rocks. Two pairs of blue monkeys engaged in human activity and facing each other, decorated the walls. One of the monkeys strums a string instrument and two of them brandish a sword in a gesture that recalls a ritual dance (Figs. 41.17, 41.18). The fourth monkey is seated on a rock clapping his hands. Blossoming crocuses grow all around.

Upon entering Room 3 through the open polythyra the spectator was faced with the illusion of a real world, almost life-sized in scale, which was thematically devoted to women and to nature. The wall paintings on the east and north walls depicted crocus being gathered and offered to the imposing, seated figure of Potnia, the nature goddess of the prehistoric Aegean.

In the rocky, mountainous landscape of the east wall, two barefoot, female figures wearing rich garments and jewellery are engrossed in collecting valuable saffron flowers. The younger figure seems to be supervised by the elder woman in this difficult and dangerous task. A third crocus gatherer proceeds to the central scene, shown on the north wall, carrying on her shoulder a basket with flowers (Fig. 41.19). The process of crocus gathering comes to an end with a young girl who empties the crocuses into a large pannier. A blue monkey offers dried stamens of crocus to the majestic Potnia, who is seated on a stepped structure, flanked by a tame, colourful griffin (Figs. 41.20, 41.21). Scholarship in the last several years seems to support the idea that this monumental composition represents an important festival in honour of the Potnia, in which young girls participated as part of their ritual education, during which they were initiated into womanhood, including motherhood.

A large wall painting depicting a marshy landscape, almost actual size, covered the west wall of Room 3b (Fig. 41.22) and at least two mud brick wall partitions (Figs. 23–5). Dense yellow and grey reeds grow out of the undulating, muddy marsh. Red dragonflies are shown on some tufts or leaves (Figs. 41.26, 41.27) and five ducks take off and fly to left and right (Figs. 41.28, 41.29). A male mallard is probably leading the skein (Fig. 41.30). Two ducks fly in parallel and the painter shows his mastery in rendering the motion, proportions and perspective of the realistic scene (Figs. 41.31, 41.32).

The majestic Potnia of Xeste 3 is depicted, in this case, in the midst of terrestrial, aerial and imaginary creatures, and adored in a symbolic milieu of serenity, where Nature is pictured at the peak of its fertility. Of special importance is the fact that the beads of the Potnia's necklaces depict ducks and dragonflies and that her garments are densely decorated with crocus flowers. Thus, the reedbed, rocky landscapes and crocus meadows are linked with the mother goddess of vegetation and fertility not so much as a natural setting, but as an idealized environment in which pictorial elements with pronounced symbolic content in their relationship to the Potnia coexist.

The walls of the narrow corridor leading to secondary staircase 9 were decorated with two pairs of life-size, mature women in procession. The figures on the north wall have fine profiles: they wear ornate snoods (*σακκοι*) and their sleeved bodices are embroidered with lilies and crocuses (Fig. 41.33). Heavy, monochrome mantels hang down from their shoulders. The woman on the left carries bunches of wild roses and the other holds a basket. The second pair of women enters the room from the south side of the corridor (Fig. 41.34). The woman on the right is painted against a red background. She holds a large green bunch of white lilies (Fig. 41.35).<sup>3</sup> Her bodice is made of red net with embroidered, miniature swallows. Her skirt is of Minoan type, with a bi-chrome pattern of squares. The upper part of the second figure is poorly preserved; however, her garments are decorated with elaborate purple motifs<sup>4</sup>. Her skirt is decorated with brightly coloured rocks and swallows flying in pairs (Fig. 41.36), stylistically identical to those on the Spring Fresco from Complex Delta. These mature women belong to a separate iconographic nucleus. They are evidently distinguished members of the local elite participating in a procession towards the Great Goddess and bearing offerings.

A fifth (seated?) woman probably decorated the southern part of the east wall of Room 3. She wears a yellow-red mantle and a wide belt decorated with sea rocks and flying fish and she holds a globular stone

vase (Figs. 41.37– 41.9). A wild rose and possibly a fruited branch of olive-tree ornament her snood (Fig. 41.40). A finely decorated silver object seems to be a conical rhyton(?), rather than a bracelet on her wrist.

The hands of two individual artists have been identified in the wall paintings of Xeste 3 so far restored. With the exception of the portraits of the four ladies along the corridor, the rest of the wall paintings have been executed by a 'hand' that is conventionally referred to as 'the Xeste 3 Master', who is attributed the responsibility for developing the iconographic programme of the whole building.

Two walls of Room 9 were decorated with blossoming osiers sprouting out of the yellow, undulating ground line (Figs. 41.41, 41.42). Above the window of the north wall there was a long frieze depicting running spirals (Fig. 41.43). A very damaged section from Room 10 depicts a mature, female figure wearing a sleeved bodice (Fig. 41.44), and there are some fragments scattered in the adjacent Rooms 11, 12 and 13 that depict imaginary animals with colourful feathers (griffins?) (Fig. 41.45), mammals, birds and abstract themes that have not yet been restored. We cannot say whether these floral and faunal subjects were part of the multi-faceted iconographic programme of the eastern section of Xeste 3, or if they were separate pictorial units with a decorative character. The bad state of their preservation and their fragmentary condition implies that some of these paintings may have been removed from the walls much earlier than the time of the earthquake or, more likely, that some of the debris from painted walls had been swept away after the earthquake and before the eruption.

## Second floor

The second floor was not preserved, but there were some stone bases for polythyra, and huge amounts of wall paintings around service staircase 9 prove that there were at least two large spaces, both extensively wall-painted. Of special importance is the fact that these wall paintings only depicted sophisticated and complex geometrical motifs, the drawing of which required the use of carefully measured geometric stencils.

In Room 9 at least two of the walls were decorated with clusters of yellow and blue rosettes inside relief lozenges against a red background (Fig. 41.46). Two large, high quality compositions depicting white-blue and red double spirals respectively, come from a space which roughly corresponds with Rooms 3 and 4 on the first floor. The subject which is currently being restored is 5 m long (Fig. 41.47) and depicts antithetical white and blue double spirals

in horizontal and vertical pairs that form colourful stylized ivy leaves (Figs. 41.48– 41.50). This masterly executed wall-painting was evidently made according to a strict iconographic programme, which was adapted and adjusted to the architectural idiom of the second floor of Xeste 3.

The actual dimensions of the rooms of the second floor will only be clear after the restoration of the relevant wall paintings and so no speculation can be made yet about their original use. However, the iconographic and artistic differentiation of the wall paintings favours a distinct, and as yet unknown, function of that area of Xeste 3.

## Conclusions

The architectural plan and distribution of fresco themes in Xeste 3 strongly suggest that this building was a centre of ritual activity for the community, its iconographic programme standing in tandem with the performance of actual gender-separation ceremonies or rites that were taking place on both the ground and the first floor. Ongoing restoration and study show that these wall paintings form an iconographic program that was multifaceted in its conception and execution (Fig. 41.51).

The iconography of Xeste 3 offers an unparalleled trove of information on Aegean society and religion; indeed for modern scholarship Xeste 3 constitutes a major chapter of the Aegean BA bible. However, this abundantly illustrated book shows that, even if its archaeological context is known, much of its original concept and meaning eludes us, since the text is missing.

## Notes

1. The time and money consuming restoration of the wall paintings from Xeste 3 is made possible by the skilled team of conservators who work at the laboratory of Akrotiri under the direction of the chief restorers I. Michailidis, T. Voulgaris, A. Gerontas and L. Kalam-bouki, and is thanks to funds supplied by the Greek Ministry of Culture, the National Bank of Greece and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory.
2. The wall paintings from the vestibule (Room 5) of Xeste 3 are being studied by Eirini Papageorgiou.
3. X-Ray Fluorescence analysis showed that the colour green on the Xeste 3 paintings was produced by mixing Egyptian blue and yellow ochre.
4. Purple pigment, which was extracted from the murex mollusc, was used extensively on the garments of the female figures and the crocus flowers, and seems to be restricted to the paintings of Xeste 3. No such colour has been traced on the wall paintings of Minoan Crete.



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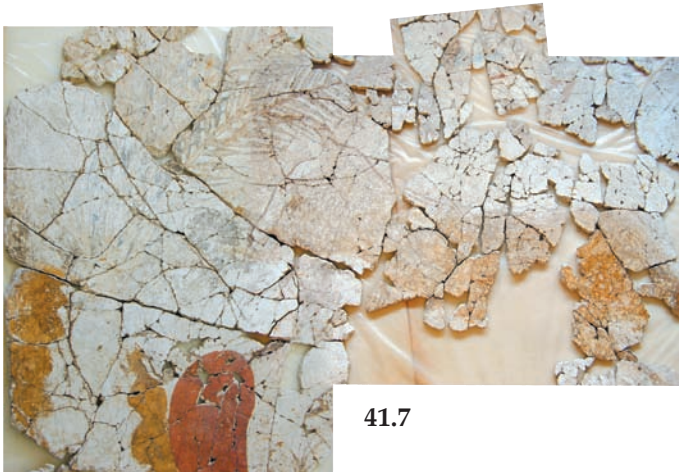
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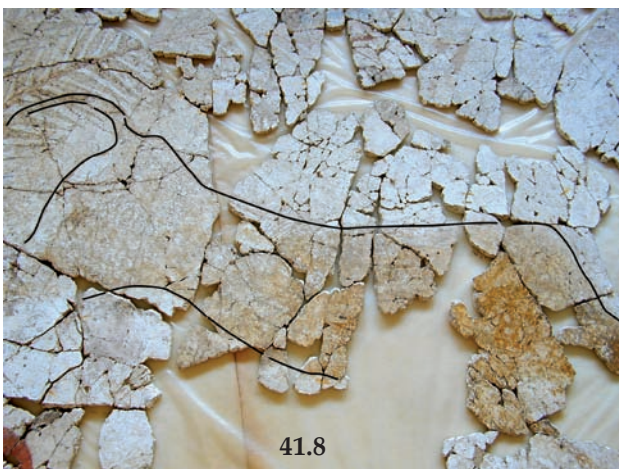
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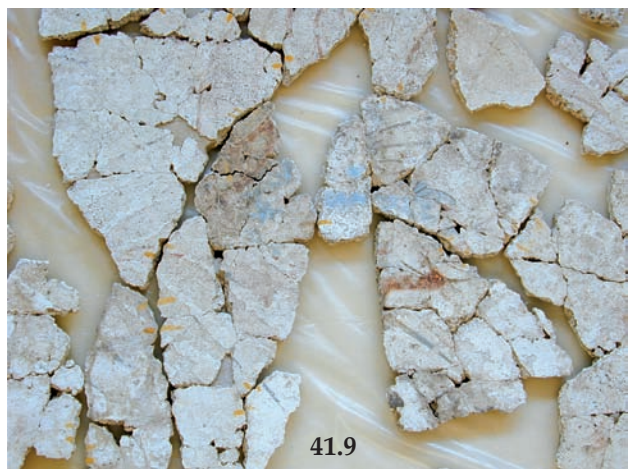
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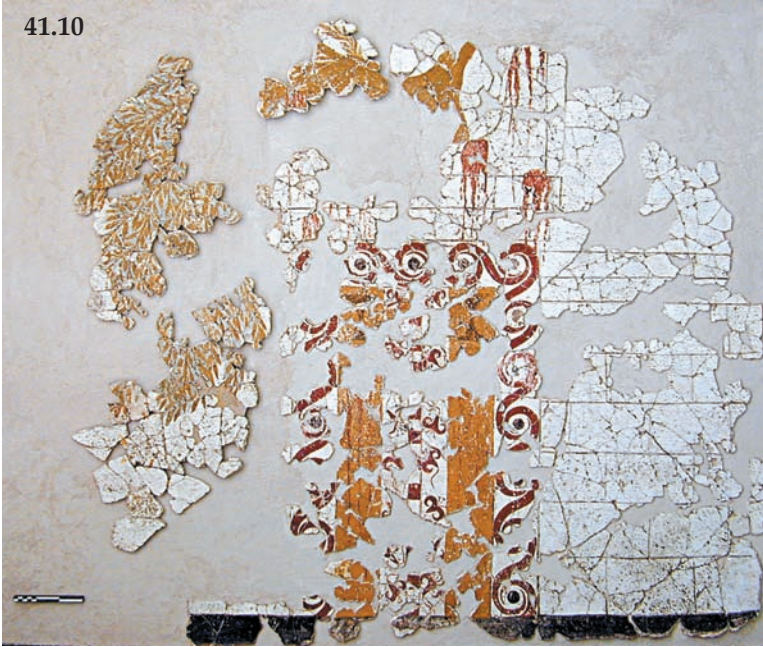


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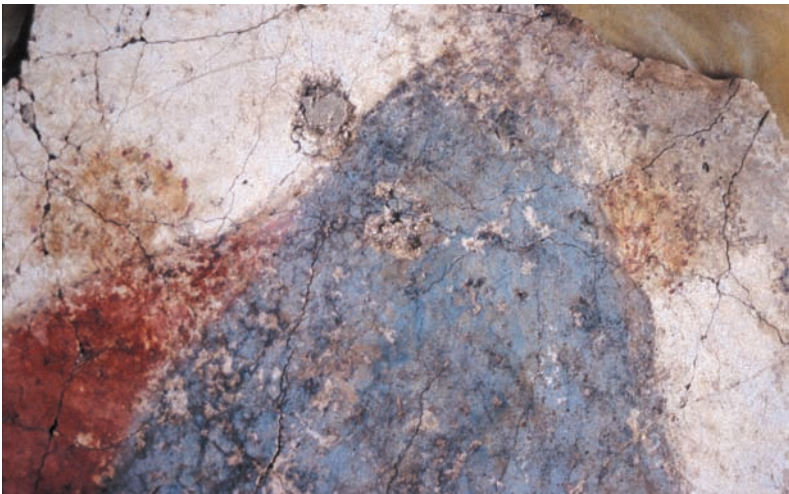
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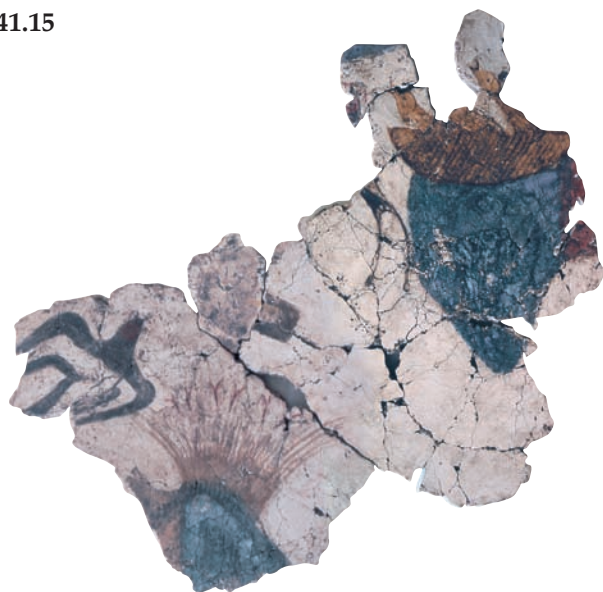


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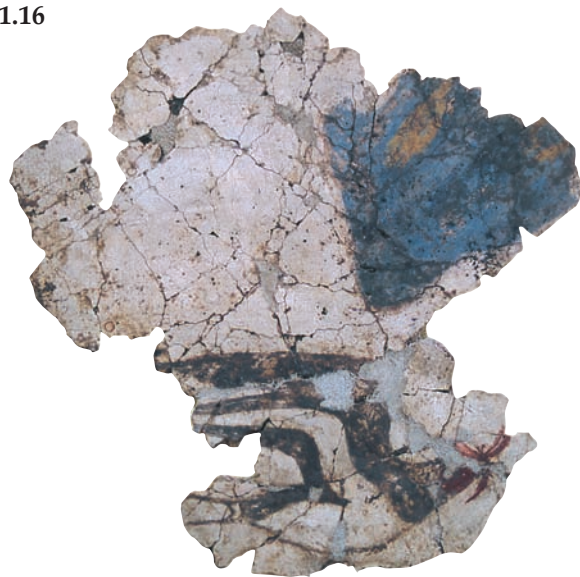




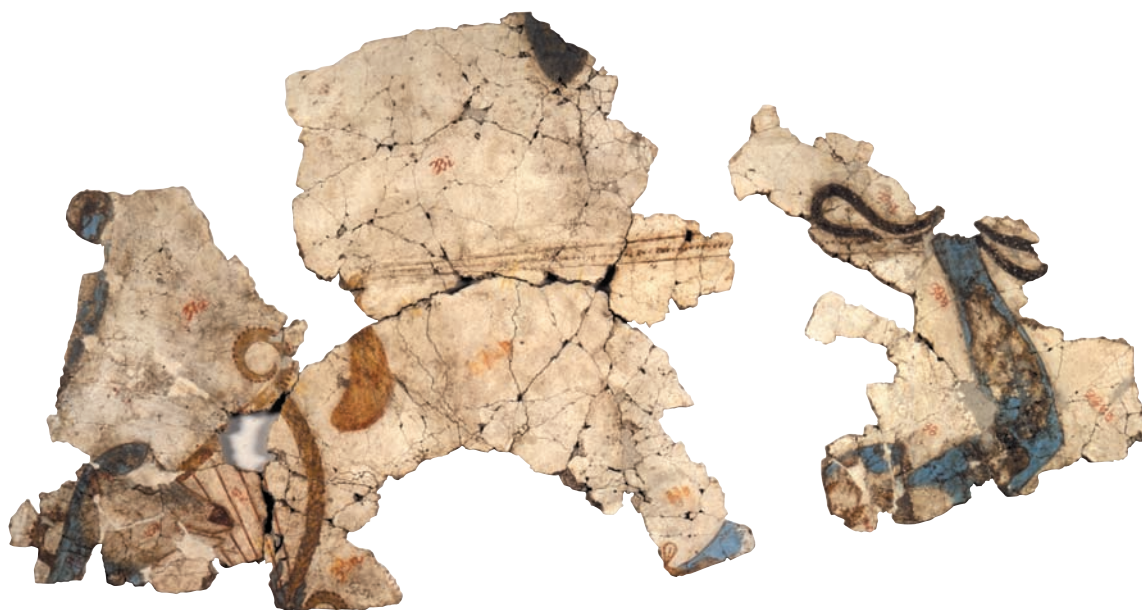
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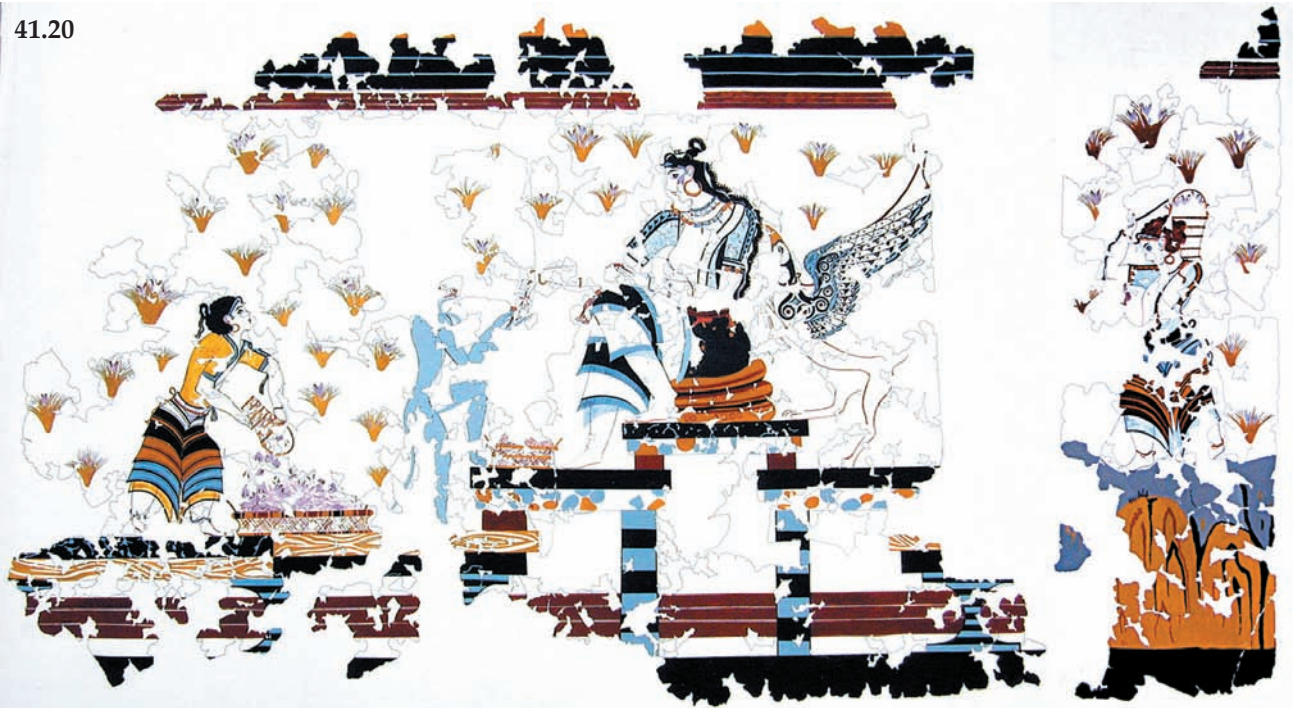


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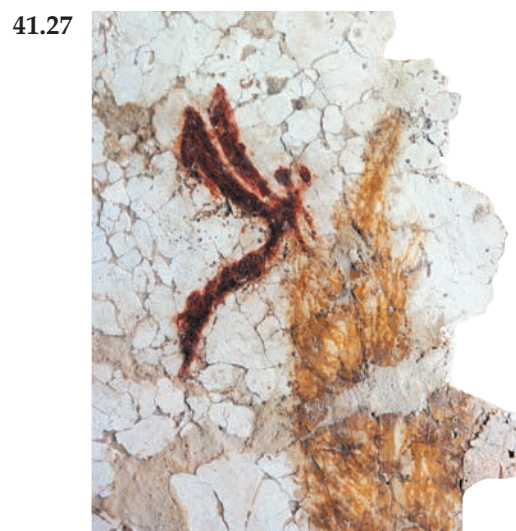
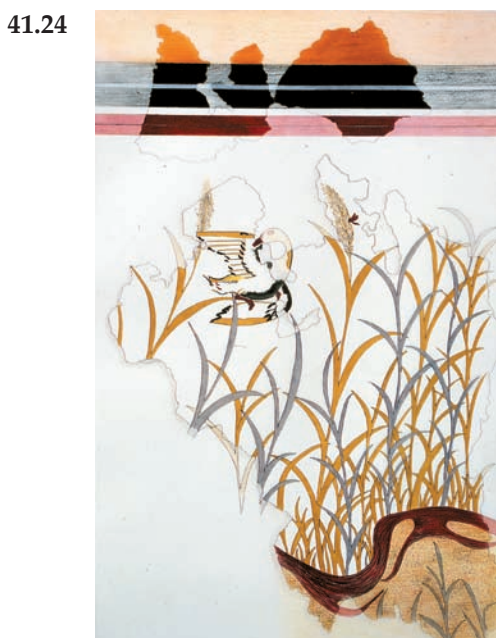
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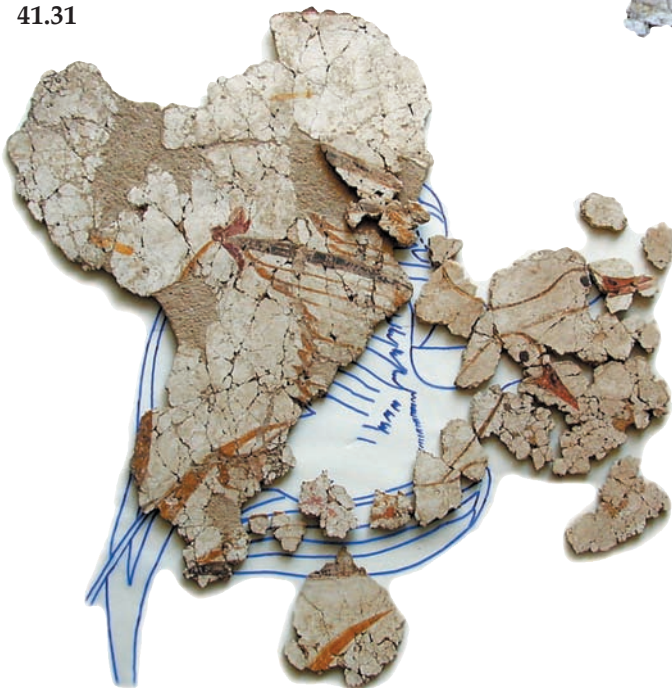
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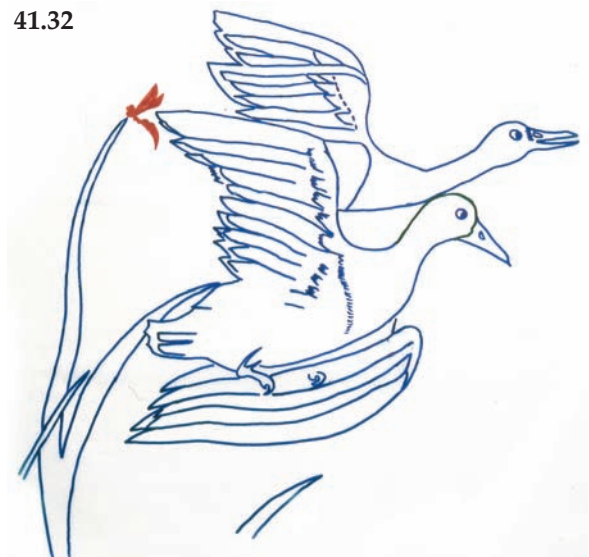
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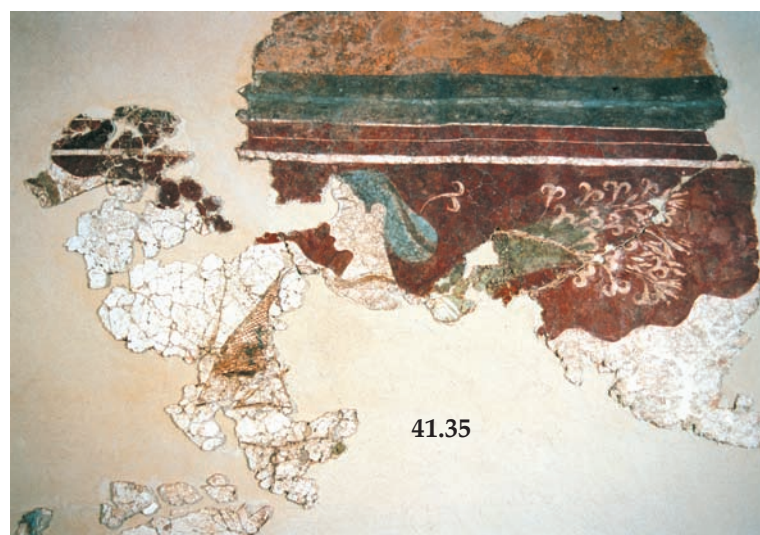
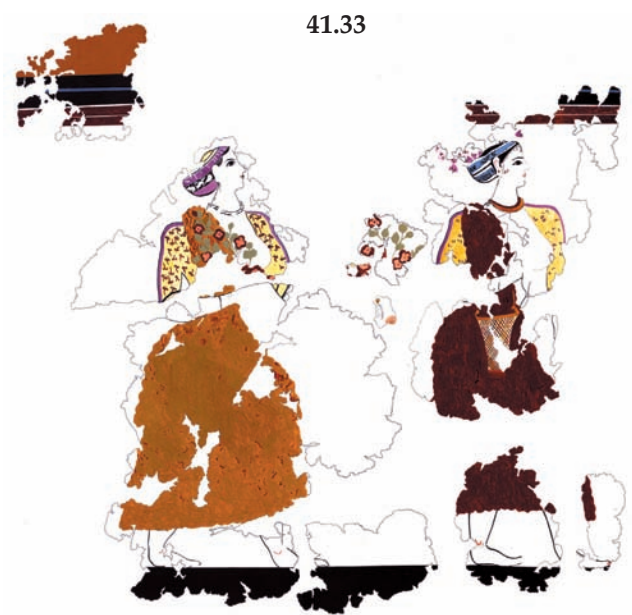
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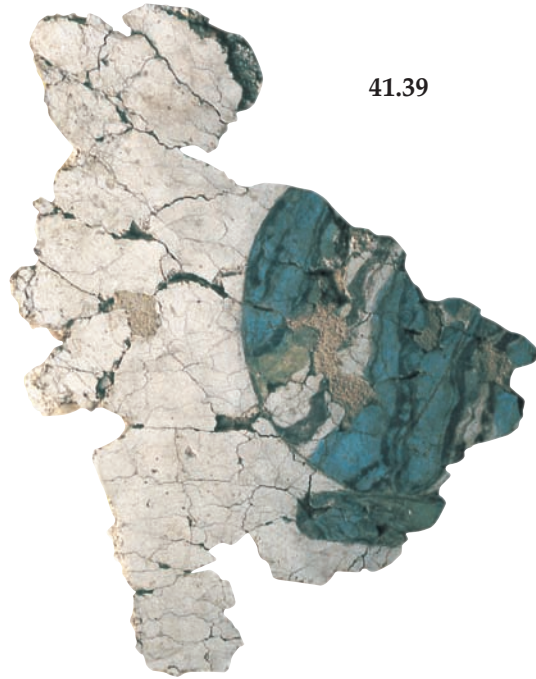




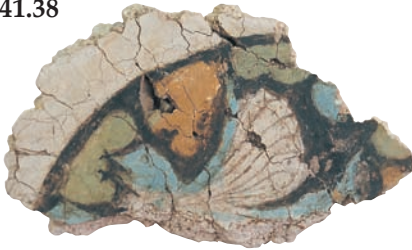
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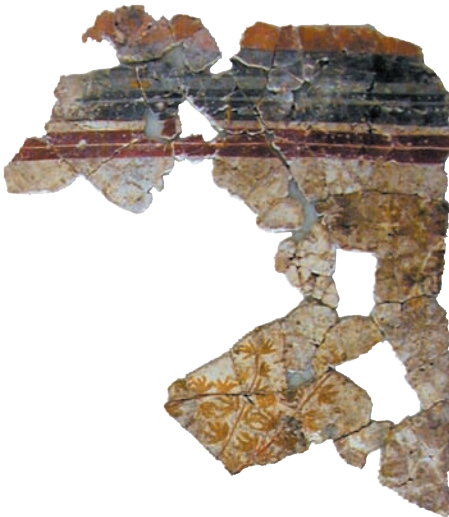
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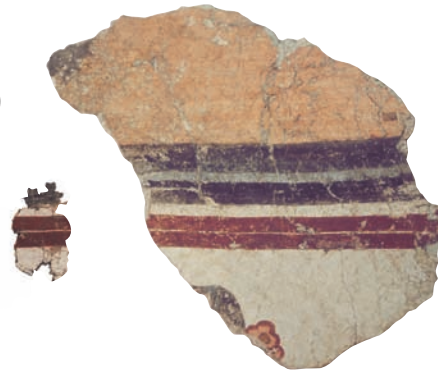
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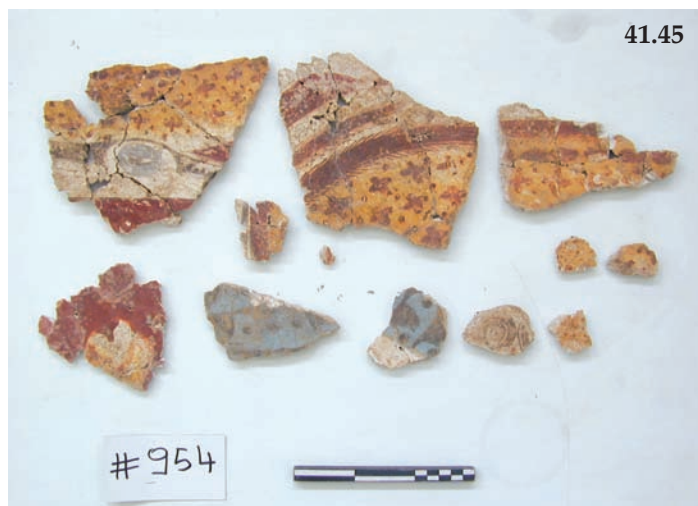
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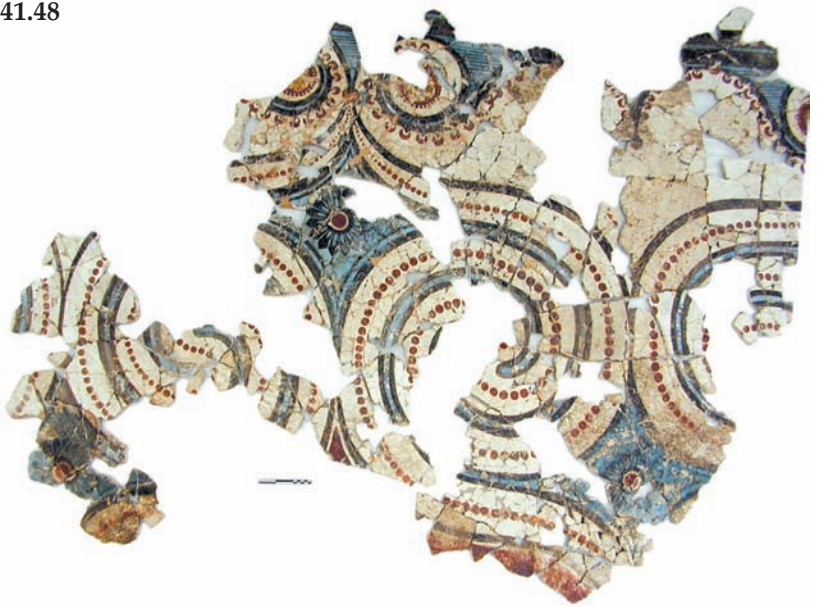




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