



Fig. 1. Akrotiri, Thera. 3D simulation of the second floor of Xeste 3, where at least five mural compositions depicted red and blue spirals.

4. Conservation and restoration of murals in Akrotiri, Thera

During the years 2010-2012 the Secretariat General for the Aegean resumed its earlier active support of the Akrotiri Excavation project, by funding the conservation and scientific study of wall-paintings of the building known as 'Xeste 3' supervised by the Director of the Excavations, Professor Emeritus Christos Doumas, and coordinated by the undersigned at the Wall-Paintings Conservation Laboratory.

This major project involves restoration of the "wall-paintings of spirals" from the second floor of the building, that is, at least five mural compositions of red and blue spirals. Conservation of these wall-paintings commenced in 1999 and is today at its final stages. At the same time, in collaboration with painter N. Sepetzoglou and archaeologist V. Oikonomou, a 3D simulation of the second floor of Xeste 3 will be created, a sample of which is presented here (fig. 1).

The rooms on the second floor of Xeste 3 were densely decorated with murals but their architectural shell had completely collapsed; as a result, conservation and restoration of the corresponding wall-paintings proved to be a very difficult task, since the arrangement of the walls and their dimensions are totally unknown. Regarding the lower floors of Xeste 3, the combined evidence from wall-paintings, architectural layout and movable finds document the practice of initiation rites (rites of passage) for young people of the Theran society; these ceremonies were different for boys and girls and took place in spaces with relevant iconography.

So, the multi-figured wall-painting scenes of Xeste 3 is the best-known iconographic cycle in a public building of the Bronze Age Aegean, raising the issue of 'ritual' and 'public' space in the Aegean of the second millennium BC.

All wall-paintings on the second floor of Xeste 3 exclusively portray colourful geometric patterns, which are reduced to the lozenge and spiral motif attesting the high level of mathematical accuracy of Theran craftsmen. To date, one wall-painting has been restored featuring blue spirals with red dots, with repeated heart-shaped motifs resembling enormous pairs of 'eyes' projecting from a red background (fig. 2a-b). Its monumental dimensions (5.10 m. long and 3.08 m. high) are unparalleled to any other wall-painting in Akrotiri and show that the second floor of the building, which was of smaller surface area, was considerably



higher than the two lower floors, projecting as a kind of 'gallery'. A wall-painting of similar dimensions with contrasting-coloured (red) spirals covered the south walls of this large space; in this space a system of pier-and-door partitions (polythyra) should be envisaged, with similar decoration on overlying friezes (fig. 3a, b). The fact that the wall-paintings of the blue and the red spirals are single surfaces, without any windows or fanlights, strongly suggests that this space had few openings. Thus, it could be demonstrated that the upper floor of Xeste 3 was not a pleasant sun-drenched space with an open view to the sea, or a tower, as had been proposed earlier, but probably it was an introverted and closed apartment with impressive yet oppressive mural compositions, which were probably illuminated by artificial rather than natural light.

The second floor of Xeste 3 was accessed via a small interior staircase. So, visitors could reach the 'gallery' after passing through the lower floors. Thus, after a multifaceted journey through multicoloured scenes of human activities and nature, the visitor suddenly ascended to a space devoid of gods, men, animals or plants, where repeated colourful spiralling motifs covered walls from side to side, in an alternating interplay of the four basic colours (red, blue, yellow and black) against the white background.

What was the purpose for creating this 'iconoclastic' world of masterfully drawn –yet frightening in its aspect– geometry?

If the initiate's isolation was an important stage of every initiatory procedure, as documented by ethnographic parallels and confirmed by ancient Greek literary sources, then Xeste 3 had created the required space for the initiates' total or controlled isolation by concentrating performances of the "natural" and the "ideal" environment on mural decoration and the architectural shell of its floors. However, this is just a hypothesis and conservation works will shed light on this issue in a few more years.

This archaeological project in Akrotiri has been in progress since 1967. It is a multifaceted interdisciplinary project, extremely demanding in terms of funding, carried out by a large team of specialists in excavation, conservation, documentation and promotion of highly important 'human works' of the prehistoric Aegean.

We express our warmest thanks for the funding provided by the General Secretariat for the Aegean to our team.



Fig. 2a, 2b. Akrotiri, Thera. The wall-painting of monumental dimensions (length 5.10 m. and height 3.08 m.) of blue spirals projecting from a red ground is unparalleled to any other wall-painting in the Aegean.

Fig. 3a, 3b. Akrotiri, Thera. In the interior of the same room of Xeste 3 a system of pier-and-door partitions (polythyra: fig.1) should be envisaged, with decoration of overlying friezes depicting blue running spirals.