

Minoan Artists at the Court of Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a)

The discovery of Minoan fresco painting at the site of Tell el-Dab'a, and therefore the presence of Minoan artists at foreign courts, has transformed our view of cultural interaction in the eastern Mediterranean world. These wall paintings on lime plaster have been partly reconstructed to reveal bull-leaping and bull-grappling scenes, some of them against a maze pattern (fig. 39) and felines (lions or leopards) chasing ungulates (fig. 120). Hunting scenes, life-size figures, men with staffs, and a white female wearing a flounced skirt, as well as heraldic griffins (fig. 40) have also emerged. As large as the griffins from Knossos, these griffins also probably flanked a throne. The hard lime plaster, which was used in the Aegean on walls with stone foundations built on rock, did not adhere well to the mud-brick walls at Avaris, which were built on alluvium. Furthermore, walls of this type tend to compress over an extended period of time. This is probably what happened in Palaces F and G,

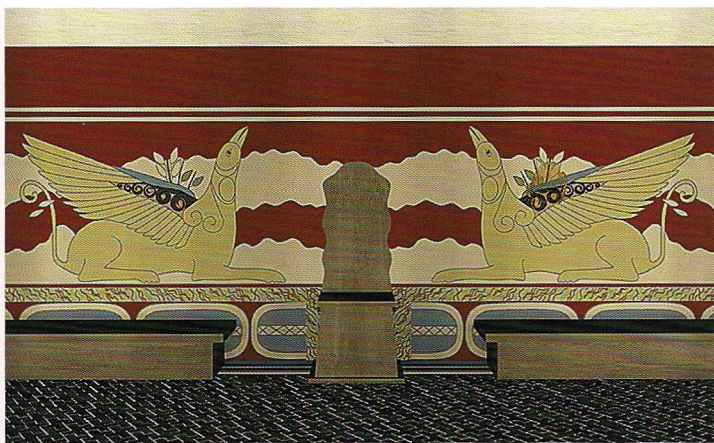


Figure 40. Reconstruction of throne room with wall painting of heraldic griffins. Tell el-Dab'a, Palace F. Dynasty 18, reigns of Hatshepsut–Thutmose III.

causing the painted plaster to flake off the walls. The fragments must have been collected and dumped from the access ramp.

The fresco technique used to produce the wall paintings and the style and motifs employed leave no doubt that Minoan masters were at work. Also at this time, during the reign of Hatshepsut and the early years of Thutmose III, representations of Minoan delegations appear in tombs of Theban high officials (see fig. 85). The presence of Minoan art in Egypt cannot be explained simply as fashionable palace beautification. Rather, distinctive motifs such as the large griffins and the half-rosette frieze on the large Taureador fresco in Palace F (fig. 39) are emblematic of the palace at Knossos. The use of specifically Minoan royal motifs in a palace in the Nile Delta is a clear indication that an encounter on the highest level must have taken place between the courts of Knossos and Egypt. A proposed alliance between the Minoan thalassocracy and Egypt in the Thutmosid period would be reinforced by the identification of Tell el-Dab'a with Perunefer. The presence of Minoan royal emblems, the heraldic full-scale griffins, and the large-scale representation of the female in a flounced skirt may suggest that a political marriage took place. The palace was then perhaps equipped with wall painting imagery, indispensable for the spiritual life of Minoan royalty. It has been claimed that the throne room at Knossos was intended not for a king, but for a queen.¹ She would have taken her place between the two seated griffins depicted in the Knossos throne room, an allusion to the Minoan Great Goddess, Mistress of Animals. Such an iconographic scenario could also be claimed for Palace F at Tell el-Dab'a, with its heraldic Minoan style of griffins.

MB

1. See Reusch 1958; Niemeier 1986; and N. Marinatos 1995. For an excellent overall reference, see Bietak, Marinatos, and Palyvou 2007.

