

Theran written report



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Theran art and what it tells us about Bronze Age culture
The frescoes of Akrotiri are unique as they are the only paintings that have been preserved to near perfection from the Minoan world. Unlike those from Crete which only have few remaining fragments. Through the restoration and the clarity of the works there is not much room for guesswork or uncertainty about their function or meaning as their artwork. These wall paintings were used as decoration in houses and buildings for many years. They gave historians and archaeologists insight into their lives, society and their pre-historical cultures. The people of this culture display images of things that partake in their lives including their domestic, daily lives and religious beliefs. The wall paintings in Akrotiri partake in a significant part of archaeological evidence of life in the Bronze Age era.

In the civilizations of Crete and Egypt wall paintings weren't used just for decoration but also for religious purposes or veneration towards the ruler or king of the time. This religious purpose interlinked with their values, traditions and society as it was part of their everyday lives. And now archaeologists and historians can interpret their way of life and understand their values. Akrotiri, the ancient city of Santorini, is known to be the best preserved prehistoric site. The site was discovered in 1866 and since 1967 Professor Marinatos has been the head of all excavations.

The discoverers did not find any bodies but very well preserved artifacts, pottery and artwork. The volcanic eruption that occurred preserved all these works. We presume that the supposed 30,000 inhabitants hurried out of the city before the volcanic eruption. This eruption is thought to have occurred at the end of the 17th century B.

C. in what seems to be one of the biggest eruptions in the history of our planet. In every house found there are many well preserved wall paintings covering the walls. They were also found in public and private buildings showing their daily lives and routines.

They painted geometrical symbols, lifeless objects, buildings, vegetation, animals and even humans². There was a variety of drawings found in the homes which seemed to relate to the people living there. The people in these paintings were well dressed with jewelry and other rich items. Different animals were also depicted in these wall paintings. These wall paintings give archaeologists and historians understanding of the people of Akrotiri.

The House of Ladies This rich and private house was a three-storey house which contained many clear, well preserved wall paintings. The theme of one of the rooms included a scene of ladies after which the house has been named. The lower part of the western section wall paintings consisted of a large reddish-yellow surface, while the upper part consisted of a pattern of black, red and blue bands alternating with white. The middle part consisted of a representation of blossoming plants growing out of the ground. The stems have sprung from curving leaves and have flowers coming off them.

When the artist painted these plants they used black for the outlines, blue for the main parts of the flower, and yellow for the anthers that are coming off the tips of the flowers. These flowers are of the *Pancratium Lily* that grow on sandy beaches which still grow on the shores of Thera. But which are now better known as ??? sea daffodils???. These sea daffodils are associated with

the veneration of a goddess³. The scene of a woman bending over, holding an apron is considered a priestess ceremony.

In other traditions and cultures including Christianity, Greek and even Minoan the image of sea daffodils is related to death. Does this give us the reason to interpret that this may have something to do with death or is it a totally different meaning to the people of Akrotiri? The lower part of the wall painting in the eastern section consisted of a thick black band, while the upper end consists of alternating narrow black and red bands. Between these the theme of this wall painting was used on both the north and south walls.

The entire middle part is divided in two by a black, blue, black strip and a wavy band across it. Above this band are diamond-shaped figures outlined in black, painted in blue that are continuously repeated. Beneath the wavy band are female figures shown doing various actions. On the south wall a female figure with black hair and a red band on her cheek moves left. She is wearing a gold earring, a short necklace, a short sleeved top and a long skirt, quite similar to Minoan types. The female figure on the north wall moves right. She also has black hair and a red band on her cheek.

She wears a gold earring and a bracelet. Her breasts are exposed and hang down over her dress. Both these female figures seem to indicate that they are participating in some sort of activity which is unknown as the wall between them is unable to be restored. Due to the chests found in this room and the interpreted sacred vessels and jugs, this room is thought to have been a shrine, according to Doumas. These females look to be participating

in some sort of ritual act. Though some think otherwise as these chests are found in everyday homes. The Fisherman This fresco on the north wall was discovered in remarkable condition and seems that during the tremors of the eruption the wall painting fell off the wall and slid down until it hit the floor and there it remained upright against the wall.

This wall painting illustrates a young, nude male figure with his head painted blue (most probably to display his shaven hair⁴). The fisherman's arms are extended in front of him and he is holding a bunch of fish in each hand. These fish are painted black for the outline and fins, yellow for the belly and blue for the back. The other Fisherman fresco found on the west wall is not in as good a condition as the one on the north wall as it must have collapsed and was damaged. There is still no problem restoring this wall painting to almost completion. This young, nude male figure is holding a small bunch of fish in each hand though they are different colours to the other one. These colours consist of black for the outlines and fins, white on the belly and blue on the back. According to Nanno Marinatos⁵ these figures are not simply fisherman, they are young worshippers making an offering to a god or goddess.

She also indicates that their shaven heads suggest that they belong to a religious group. When archaeologists interpret the meaning behind this fresco they interpret it to be about fishing in the Bronze Age culture. The fish have been depicted as either unique or very rare species in the Bronze Age fishing range⁶. Due to the poor preservation exact identification of these fish is not possible. This also indicated that the artist of this wall painting was able to observe and draw real fish. We can also see that this may also be an

offering to a goddess or might even be suggestive of a rite of passage.

Priestess In the lower part of this fresco the female figure is wearing a long, yellow ochre robe, elaborate jewelry and has her lips and ear painted red.

Her blue shaven head has on it a snake-like band. The young priestess is depicted as moving towards her left as if to enter the next room. In one hand she is holding a ??? firebox??? 7 which she is apparently sprinkling on a substance, maybe incense. This interpretation is made by the archaeologists of The Theran Foundation. Other archaeologists concur, Spyridon Marinatos believes she is holding a gold and silver vase with a ??? kind of cake??™ or ??? fig pudding??™ contained. Christos Doumas believes this fresco has too many variables to specify the true meaning of it, ??? whether a priestess or a girl of the household??|whether this was done for religious purposes or merely to purify the air??|it is difficult to decide???

This wall painting depicts the clothing worn by priestess??™ by the Aegean people. This wall painting gives archaeologists and historians an insight to the royalty in the Bronze Age culture, specifically the Aegean culture.

Miniature Frieze From the restoration of the upper part of this room it is clearer that the artist has sought to tell a story which is depicted on all four walls. It begins on the south-west corner which is portrayed as a town and could even be Akrotiri itself. This part of the voyage is not very clear due to damage from the eruption. This is different from the north section of the frieze as it is much clearer and can give more interpretation and meaning of the people of Akrotiri. This section depicts another town consisting of a rocky shore, a wreck of ships and drowned, naked men marching which is

protected by warriors. The armor and weapons of the warriors prove their identity: helmet, large shield, long spear and sword.

Several scenes above this town depict a herd of cattle on the left of the town and a flock of sheep and goats on the right, with shepherds leading them into a circular pen. The third town is on the coast and in its seas there is a fleet of ships in the foreground and background. There are many trees, bushes, birds and beasts which are depicted as the ??? eternal struggle for survival???. In the fourth town the fleet is sailing away and is heading to the fifth town. A small towing boat in front of the fourth town has five oarsmen and seems to be carrying an important person due to the throne like structure on the stern. This fleet includes seven large boats with their masts raised except for one. Seen as there are weapons including spears and helmets there is reason to believe that the ship??'s passengers are warriors, and who are depicted to be in action elsewhere. Thus this entire voyage is revealed as a long and dangerous one.

The Miniature Frieze has many interpretations. Some believe that it is depicted as an important historical event in Theran history. In a section of the south wall there is a group of ships which have been interpreted as a ??? sacred regatta??', a nautical festival or even a wedding procession. Whatever this fresco truly depicts it must concern a significant event in the Theran society. There is thought that someone that was involved in this expedition lived in this building. This wall painting tells us many things about the Bronze Age society including the developed nature of this society.

It is said to be one of the earliest known maps in Europe and is also said to be one of the most important monuments in Aegean art⁹. Spring Fresco This wall painting uses a range of colours including black, red, yellow and blue. This represented the mountains and the rocky land of Santorini. There are blossoming lilies with yellow leaves and stalks and red flowers on the landscape. Anaya Sarpaki has interpreted this wall painting as purely decorating and this room may have even been a bedroom, due to the lilies in the background. Others including Sara Immerwahr has interpreted differently, she thinks this room was a cult place.

Many controversies are involved in many of the interpretations. Boxing Boys These two young male figures have been painted on a white ground with a red wave above their blue partly shaven heads. Each figure has long black hair and is wearing earrings, necklaces, bracelets and anklets, as well as boxing gloves on their right hand. Professor Marinatos saw these two brothers and believed they had been members of the family who lived there¹⁰.

Others think this could be a form of entertainment for royalty. As you can see this wall painting is difficult to interpret due to the many variables to consider and the time period also. Saffron Gatherers The east and north walls were decorated with frescoes representing the gathering of the flower crocus, a plant known for its fragrance. This fresco has been interpreted to understand that this activity is a major ceremony partaken by the Aegean people. These plants are collected by young girls and women dressed in elaborate clothing and decorated with valuable ornaments.

They are offered to the ??? Great Goddess??™ and the ??? Mistress of Animals??™ 11, who is shown sitting on a throne with imaginary beasts beside her. The animals are represented as a blue monkey and a snake. This fresco depicts important rituals of Aegean people and their gods, giving archaeologists and historians a clearer understanding of the people of Akrotiri and the Bronze Age era. Overall, these frescoes give a broad insight to the lives, society and beliefs of the people of Akrotiri. Through these frescoes archaeologists and historians can interpret them and understand the lives of this ancient society, and even the Bronze Age. Footnotes: 1, 2 <http://www.therafoundation.org/articles/art/wallpaintings/historywallpaintings3>

<http://jxb.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/60/2/3534>, 5 Antiquity: Pathways to The Past6, 7, 8 <http://www.therafoundation.org/akrotiri/thewesthouse/thewesthouse9>

<http://www.therafoundation.org/articles/environmentflorafauna/thefishermenfrescoesinthelightofthefishboneevidence10> <http://www.therafoundation.org/akrotiri/buildingbeta/buildingbeta/view11>

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http://www.santorini-art.com/santorini_wall_paintings.html (accessed 26/08/10) http://www.travel-to-santorini.com/page.php?page_id=4 (accessed 26/08/10) <http://www.hellenic-art.com/statues/akrotiri.htm> (accessed 26/08/10)

Antiquity: Pathways to the Past (1995) Unlocking the Past: Preliminary Studies in the Ancient World (2008)