Snakes and Lions

A New Reading of the West House Frescoes from Thera

KAREN POLINGER FOSTER

In the Aegean Bronze Age, palaces and some private houses were richly decorated with wall paintings depicting people, animals, and landscape features, as well as non-representational motifs. Unfortunately, only a small portion of these frescoes have survived. On Crete, the best-preserved Minoan wall paintings come from the palace at Knossos, while on the Greek mainland there are fairly complete frescoes from the Mycenaean palaces at Pylos and Tiryns. Very few frescoes had been recovered on the Cycladic islands until the recent discovery of extraordinary wall paintings, long buried beneath volcanic debris, on the island of Santorini. The Thera frescoes, as they are usually known, present exciting challenges of interpretation and assessment. This article offers a new analysis of a particularly intriguing group of paintings from the West House.

** Destruction and Rediscovery **

Some 3500 years ago, ominous rumblings came from the volcano at the heart of the island known as Thera, Strongyle, or Santorini in ancient times, and now called Santorini (Fig. 1; see box on historical and geological background). The inhabitants of a thriving harbor town near the modern village of Akrotiri on the island’s southern coast heeded the warning, and fled with most of their valuables and livestock. After the first eruption, a few people returned to clear the rubble, but they soon abandoned their work in the face of a second cataclysm.

In 1967 the archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos began probing the thick deposits of volcanic material that blanketed the town. As at Pompeii and Herculaneum, the fall of pumice and ash had completely enombed the settlement, preventing its reoccupation. Marinatos and his successor, Christos Doumas, discovered a nearly intact Bronze Age town, with its streets, squares, buildings, and interior furnishings just as they had been left (Fig. 2). The excavated remains have been painstakingly consolidated and restored, especially the wall paintings, many of which are now on view in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

Most of the frescoes are on a large scale, with vivid colors, sure draftsmanship, and a certain exuberance. Subject matter is extremely varied, since the paintings were intended for particular types of rooms and specific purposes. In Section Delta, for instance, three sides of a room have a continuous frieze of blooming lilacs, rock formations, and sweetsmelling herbs. Building Beta contains a series of ceiling pictures of aseemly groups of people, as well as a room with antelope and lion sculptures. Nearby fall heavy papyrius and beautifully drawn women dressing, a room in the House of the Ladies. The two floors of frescoes in the House of the Ladies seem to depict scenes of important stages of initiation rites. Found among fragments of sword-wielding and lyre-playing monkeys, perhaps satire, were also found in this building.

** The West House Frescoes **

Of all the frescoes discovered thus far, those from Rooms 4 and 5 of the West House have excited the most interest. The West House sits prominently on the north side of Triangle Square (Figs. 2-3), with its excavated shops, workshops, and rooms at ground level. The rooms of the upper story are more elaborate, with niches and windows along the walls (Fig. 4).

From the top of the stairs, one passes either into Room 3, with its large window overlooking Triangle Square, or into Room 6, which was perhaps a banquet hall. Room 5 could be entered directly from Room 3 or through a cupped passageway behind Room 6. From Room 5, a door leads into Room 4, whose partitioned southwest corner (Room 4a) is referred to as a lavatory or purification room.

In Room 5, there are two large-scale frescoes, each showing a male nude carrying clutches of mackerel and dolphin fish. The young men occupy the northeast and southwest corners respectively, and if actually walking, they would converge upon the northeast corner, where a large offering table with marine decorations was found.
The frescoes in Room 5 were necessarily confined to long, high panels and were painted in miniature style, since the walls were otherwise given over to windows, niches, and doors. The east wall frieze depicts a stream or river winding across a semi-tropical landscape of palms and papyrus, through which a griffins and a wild cat chase birds and deer. The north wall panel is unfortunately quite fragmentary. The lower portion shows parts of four boats, amongst which are three figures tumbling in the water (Fig. 13). Above, on a rocky coast, aarchan warriors equipped with boat’s tusk helmets and rectangular body shields. Animals are herded left and right in two rows at the top of the frieze, next to a sheepfold, a well, and a gathering of men and women. A small gap separates these pieces from ones in which a man in a long robe, accompanied by kilted attendants, walks at least four similarly garbed men atop a barren-looking hill.

The south wall frieze is highly involved, with a multitude of miniature details compressed into a space about 16 inches high and 20 feet long (Fig. 5). At either end, clusters of buildings enclose the composition. These towns are animated by tiny people, many of them looking out of windows or surveying the scene from rooftops. Along the right-hand shore a procession of men forms up, while above men sprint to a tower and back to the town. Six other men wear turban chaks.

The central part of the south wall frieze is devoted to a flat-topped sailing boat from left to right in a dolphin-filled sea; six special boats with stern carvings, deck canopies, festoons, prove ornaments, and other embellishments; one boat with a small deck canopy; one boat under sail; and six plain boats, three in one bay, two in another, and one being paddled along, perhaps as a pilot boat.

On the wide door jamb between Rooms 5 and 4, there was another large-scale figure, that of a woman. Her unusual hairstyle (see above) is interpreted as a cap with stuffed snakes. N. Marinatos (1965), her body and face paint, and her shaggy robe have earned her the title ‘young priestess.’ In her hands she holds an object most often identified as an incense burner.

Room 4 is decorated by eight (presently seven and one-half) full-size structures, here called kiosks but also referred to as stern cabins, carcase, palaigunis and litters (Fig. 6). These kiosks surround a lower panel or dado painted in imitation stone patterns. On the west side of Room 4 is a deep-set window, with faux marble on the ledge and two marble vases painted on either side. Each vase holds formal sprays of lilies, either arranged in water or pruned in soil.

Sense and Significance

We may begin by posing some general questions about the West House paintings. First, to what extent are we to conceive of them as a unified pictorial program, a set of images linked by a common theme or function (see Haag 1955; Morgan 1953)? Second, how can we best correlate pictorial, archeological, and architectural evidence for the function of these rooms (N. Marinatos 1983, 1984, 1985)? Finally, how much of what we see is meant to be narrative, a true story, or a purely decorative event? This is particularly difficult to determine in the case of the West House paintings, since they do not have registers to help order space and time, and the viewer must therefore reconstruct the images for himself.

In the West House frescoes, narrative and pictorial embellishment were achieved by showing important episodes within a story as vignettes, such as the scenes in Figure 5. These fall into three main thematic groupings: celebration of a special event or festival, and the preparation for, or the aftermath of, armed conflict. In my own view, the theme is one of celebration rather than confrontation. I would like to propose that the pictures in Rooms 4 and 5 served to commemorate and describe a particular Cycladic festival, which I take to be an anniversry celebration or jubilee. In addition, the Frescoes provided the setting or "backdrop" for certain rites essential for the jubilee's enactment.

A Cycladic Jubilee

The paintings in Room 4 are crucial to this new reading. Figure 5 offers a reconstruction of how the eight kiosks were arranged. (The south doorway may once have been

Glossary

greekic: a combination of geographical and cultural factors characterizing and influencing a particular culture.

griffin: an imaginary creature popular in Aegean Bronze Age art, with a lion’s body and a bird’s head and wings.

iconography: visual representation of ideas by means of images and artistic conventions.
papyroform: describes design motifs using elements of the papyrus plant, often in a stylized manner.
pictorial program: a set of images, usually rendered in wall painting or sculpture, decorated, linked by a common theme or function.

Sed Festival: in Egypt, a periodic reenactment and celebration of the pharaoh’s crucial role as unifier of Upper and Lower Egypt.
totem: an object, usually an animal or plant, serving as an emblem or symbol of a group.

Selected interpretations of the south and north wall panels of the West House, Room 5.
Historical and Geological Background

Thera, the southernmost of the Cyclades, was originally a small round island, the result of several prehistoric volcanic eruptions caused by friction between African and Eurasian tectonic plates. In the mid-2nd millennium B.C., the Thera volcano erupted in an explosion thought to be comparable in scale to the A.D. 1883 Krakatoa eruption, which was so violent that it could be heard 3000 miles away. A quiet period ensued until 192 B.C., when Strabo tells us that “the whole sea boiled and blazed.” Sublime, less dramatic activity persists to the present day.

Thera was settled in the mid-3rd millennium (Early Cycladic II and III periods, ca. 2600-2000 B.C.). During the Middle Cycladic period (ca. 2000-1550/1700 B.C.), Thera established increasingly wider contacts with the other Cycladic islands, the Greek mainland, and Crete. The end of the Middle Cycladic period on Thera is marked by damage of uncertain cause, following which the harbor town near modern Akrotiri on the southern coast was rebuilt on a rather grand scale (Late Cycladic IA). Marinatos’ excavation of this elegant seaside town seemed at first to support a theory he had elaborated nearly 30 years before, in which he proposed that the mid-2nd millennium eruption of the Thera volcano buried the harbor town and simultaneously devastated Knossos and the other great Minoan palace centers on Crete, only 70 miles to the south.

A few undisturbed areas remain, however, where the Minoan period and the post-definition of the town can be clearly seen. The last Minoan period on Thera has been designated the Late Cycladic IB and II periods, with the Minoan IB period marking the end of the Minoan period on Thera and the beginning of the Late Minoan IB period. The Late Minoan IB period is characterized by a decline in the number of Minoan settlements, with the exception of the small Minoan settlement on the islet of Akrotiri, which continued to be inhabited until the end of the period. The Late Minoan IB period is also characterized by a decline in the number of Minoan settlements, with the exception of the small Minoan settlement on the islet of Akrotiri, which continued to be inhabited until the end of the period.

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Chronological Framework

(All dates B.C. and approximate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Revision</th>
<th>B.C.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thera harbor town, final phase (Late Cycladic IA)</td>
<td>1550-1500</td>
<td>1700-1625</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thera eruption</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>1625</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minoan new palaces, pre-destruction (Late Minoan IB)</td>
<td>1500-1450</td>
<td>1610-1550</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minoan disasters</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>1550</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Detail of the south wall panel, West House Room 5. (From Dounas 1983: Figs. 20-21)
10. Chart showing the details of each kiosk in the West House Room 4. Individual motifs are not to scale. (Drawing by Demie Hofmeyr)


7. Driving of asses and oxen about the walls (Fig. 16).
8. Participation of monkeys.
9. Dedication of field and shooting arrows.
10. Carrying of pharaoh and princes in palanquins (Fig. 17).
11. Reception of foreign dignitaries.
12. Dual reenactment of pharaoh as King of Upper and Lower Egypt (Fig. 14).
13. Erecting the Djed pillar, a symbol of stability (Fig. 16).

Returning to Thebes and the West House paintings, I suggest that they show a Cy埃及学 celebration, with strong Egyptian influence in both its structure and its substance. When seen in this light, the diverse and seemingly unrelated elements in the frescoes coalesce into a meaningful pictorial program. The festival seems set before us the life-size pictures of hide-covered kiosks or shrines, four of one type and four of another, the arrival of the snake- and lion-topped boats with their kiosks and visitors (both human and divine); the groups of men garbed specially in long robes or furry cloaks; the ritual sea battle; the paraded beards; the readying of spears; the hilltop gathering of long-robed dignitaries; and even a monkey holding a rope (S. Marinatos 1974:41).

Previously obscure details now find places within the pictorial and narrative structure. The two boats at the far right of the miniature ships panel, for example, might well hold a pair of decorative kiosks or shrine frameworks. As for the small (inset) rectangle beside an crowned man in the staged sea battle, this may include his recitation of ritual directions.

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As we have seen, the Egyptian concept of dualism was based upon a relatively clear-cut geographical division of the land into Upper and Lower parts. Elsewhere in the Aegyptiun, it is more difficult to define the relationship between topography and geologic or geopolitical concepts.

What then does the dualism of the West House frescoes signify? The

iconographic pairs—snakes and lions, was-like bars with tufts and with ivy/papyrouiform fillings—suggest the existence of a league of Egyptian lands or districts aligned in two groups, with individual members readily identifiable (though not each by such distinctions as bull decoration or the type of kiosk pendant and sway (Fig. 10).

The lion and tuft-filled wadjet group may have dominated, to judge from the fact that a lion stern-totem and a kiosk with this type of pole-top appear on the most elaborated of the miniature ships. Or perhaps Thera was in this group, and so its importance was enhanced since Thera was the jubilee site on this occasion. We might also recall that a prominent lion figure prominently in the small landscape scene in the ships panel, as does a leaping wild cat on the east wall frieze in Room 5.

The frescoes offer ambiguous clues as to whether six or eight members participated in the jubilee. One is inclined to think that there were eight, not only because of the eight kiosks in Room 4, but also because of the eight rooftop ladies who greet the flotilla. These women stand singly or in twos and threes, and are larger than any of the men depicted. In addition, eight horns of consecration, four on each side, border the buildings from which the women watch. The number of women and horns may be neither...
Conclusion

The West House and other Thera frescoes attest to considerable Egyptian influence, however the iconography may have been transmitted. This influence is seen in tuft-filled war-lily and papyrus plant forms, river scenes with Nilotic flora and fauna, partial head-shaving of youths, ritual boxing, monkeys, and the shoulder covering of the "young priestess" (N. Marinatos 1984). Even the kiosk's design, with partially walled sides and bedecked, papyrus pole, seems to have more in common with Egyptian kiosks and palaquins than with the less-embellished Minoan ones seen in models and frescoes (compare Figs. 15 and 17 with Evans 1927: Figs. 30, 502, 593). In addition to these Nihtic elements, certain symbolic and procedural aspects of the Egyptian Sei Festival seem to find an Aegean counterpart in a Cycladic jubilee celebration. Though many questions remain, we have at least one glimpse into the actual enactment of this festival, thanks to the West House frescoes.

According to this new reading of the evidence, in the spring of the jubilee year each member of the Cycladic league sent off contingents in splendidly decorated boats. They may not always have converged upon Thera, but might have celebrated on a rotating basis at other islands, such as Keos. Once the boats had arrived in the harbor, there were numerous public activities, among them greeting visitors, parading animals, watching a ritual sea battle, and carrying kiosks ashore.

A procession may have ended up in Triangle Square in front of the West House, whereupon divine or human representatives of each constituency were led upstairs. There, before full-scale painted kiosks or landscape, and a strip of water associated with fragments of sails, rowsers, and a bull painted with leaping dolphins (Abramowitz 1980).

One also wonders if similar types of jubilees were celebrated elsewhere in the Aegean. Are there, for example, signs of a Minoan jubilee in the "Town Mosaic" from Knossos on Crete, with its small faience tiles showing facades, landscapes, water, grapplers, spongers, swimmers, and animals? The newly discovered frescoes from the Stratigraphical Museum site at Knossos comprise garlands, warily and papyrus forms, as well as miniature buildings and river scenes (Warren 1985). In addition, there are many Minoan seals and signets showing boats with lightweight deck structures very much like the Thera kiosk.

On the Greek mainland, the Megaron frescoes from Mycenae show structures that Shaw (1980) reconstructed along the lines of the Thera kiosk; these paintings also include a chariot scene and façades with watching women. A marble vase fragment from Ephedra shows a relief showing men lined up on shore, and others gesticulating near a boat bearing an equipped kiosk and a dolphin figurehead (Sakkalinos 1981).
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Kiosk as depicted in a tomb from Amarna (New Kingdom).
(Drawing by Denise Hoffman after A History of Egyptian Architecture, Vol. 3, Fig. 19, by A. Badawy. University of California Press, 1968)

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