

THE WALL PAINTINGS FROM BUILDING BETA, AKROTIRI THERA. A NEW APPROACH TO THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME¹

Fragoula Georma

BUILDING BETA AND ITS EXCAVATION

Systematic excavations at the site of Akrotiri, Thera (fig. 1) were launched in 1967² by Spyridon Marinatos, Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Athens, and continued under his directorship until his untimely death at the site in 1974.³ In 1975, Christos Doumas, Marinatos' collaborator over several years, was appointed director, then an Epimelete of the Archaeological Service and later Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at the University of Athens.

Marinatos started the excavation in the area of Akrotiri in two rural plots named after their respective owners: Bronos and Arvanitis.⁴ Each plot was then subdivided in sectors (Bronos 1, Bronos 1a, Bronos 2, Arvanitis 1, Arvanitis 2, and Arvanitis 3), in which the excavation trenches were opened. In topographic terms, Bronos lies in the south part and Arvanitis in the north part of the area where the revealed remains of the ancient settlement currently extend. Building Beta, the focus of this paper, lies in area Bronos 2, together with Building Gamma.

The excavation of Building Beta started in the spring of 1967⁵ (fig. 2) and continued intermittently until the summer of 1973.⁶ Many years later, in July 2002, small-

1. I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Christos Doumas, Director of the Excavations at Akrotiri, for entrusting me with the study and the publication of the wall paintings material from Building Beta at Akrotiri. The study was carried out during my doctoral thesis at the University of Ioannina (2009) and it will be included in the collective volume of the publication of the building (architecture, pottery, wall paintings, loomweights and small finds), in collaboration with Dr Irene Nikolakopoulou, Ioannis Bitis and Dr Sophia Vakirtzi. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer of the paper for valuable observations and comments, which improved the presentation of the study. All mistakes, however, remain mine.

2. *Thera* I, 3-12. Already since 1960, Marinatos, based on circumstantial evidence, had come up with the idea of excavating in the area of the modern village at Akrotiri, in southern Thera. In 1964, he embarked on preparations for the archaeological dig, as he had to deal with difficulties arising from the geomorphology of the island. The first excavation season was launched in 1967.

3. The results of Marinatos' excavations (1967-1974) were published in the series *Thera* I-VII (1968-1976), and in the proceedings of the Archaeological Society (IAE: *Praktika Archaialogikis Etaireias*).

4. There are no notebooks for the first two excavation seasons (1967-8). Information is retrieved from the published reports in *Thera* I-II. Excavation notebooks are kept from 1969 to the present day.

5. *Thera* I, 3-16.

6. *Thera* VH, 16-21.

scale works were carried out in the interior of the building,⁷ dictated by the project for the integrated study of the wall paintings from the building. During the excavations for the foundation of the pillars of the new shelter of the site, from 1999 to 2001, trenches were opened at the external perimeter of Building Beta, which provided significant information on the building history of the complex.

Building Beta lies in the south part of the revealed area of the settlement (fig. 1), flanked to the north by Sector Delta, the Mill Square and the Square of the Monkeys. The area to the east is heavily damaged by the passing of a modern torrent, with Xeste 2 and Building Iota further east. To the south of Building Beta there was probably an open area, also heavily disturbed; Telchines Road runs along the west side of the building.

The building is a two-storied private residence of c. 260 sq m (fig. 3). It is situated in the heart of the revealed area of the settlement and is well preserved mostly in its west part; the east part is much damaged as it lies in the bed of the passing torrent. The building was furnished with the famous wall paintings of the Boxing Boys, the Antelopes and the Monkeys, the first two currently exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (fig. 8) and the third in the Museum for Prehistoric Thera on the island (fig. 11). The fragments of these wall paintings were the first to be revealed in the site by S. Marinatos already in 1967 (fig. 4). Prompt conservation and restoration of the fragments by the working team of conservators in the first excavation period (1967-1974) resulted in the swift presentation to the public of the composition of the Boxing Boys from the upper storey of Room 1 (B1) and the compositions of the Monkeys and the Calves, according to Marinatos' interpretation, from the upper storey of Room 6 (B6).⁸

The study aimed at the appraisal of the iconographic programme of Building Beta from Akrotiri and the techniques and theoretical issues pertinent to the art of wall painting in the early Late Bronze Age. An overview of the main points and conclusions is presented in this paper. Although it is evident that Building Beta is well integrated in the urban plan of the settlement, unfortunately the bad preservation of the east part hinders in many ways the definitive reconstruction of the building and the contextual discussion of its contents. Naturally, this also affects the study of the wall paintings, as there are gaps in the reconstruction of the B6 compositions, both in terms of the thematic identification and also of its association to the second decorated area, B1.

The new approach to the iconographic programme of Building Beta included the study of the material in its totality, stored or displayed in the storerooms of the excavations at Akrotiri, the Museum for Prehistoric Thera at Phira and the National

7. Doulas 2005b, 14. 2006, 11. Georma 2009, 68-9.

8. Georma et al. 2017.

Archaeological Museum at Athens. The integration of the material in the study aims at a complete presentation that lacked all these years ever since the first conservation interventions and the preliminary presentation by the excavator S. Marinatos.

THE EXCAVATION OF THE WALL PAINTINGS. THE EARLIER LAYERS

As mentioned above, the compositions from Building Beta were the first wall paintings uncovered in the site already in the first excavation season.⁹ However, their removal from the building was carried out in the following years, when the excavator felt confident about the safe execution of these specialised works. Moreover, due to significant difficulties encountered in the removal of specific large fragments from the walls of B1, Marinatos decided to preserve *in situ* parts of the Antelopes fresco and to return to the area at a later stage, when ample time and better skills would be available. The removal of those two large fragments from the north and the east walls was finally carried out in the summer of 2003 (fig. 5) in the context of the study project and the doctoral thesis on the wall paintings of Building Beta.¹⁰

During the study of the compositions from the building, fragments stored in 110 boxes were examined and totally or partially conserved; these were kept in store-rooms ever since the early excavation periods, following the restoration of select compositions. Research in the boxes and conservation of better preserved fragments resulted in the partial restoration of the composition of the two Antelopes, which originally stood on the east wall.¹¹ Furthermore, drawings and completions were made on the compositions already restored; new evidence and new iconographic themes were identified.

In the two areas furnished with wall paintings, namely B1 and B6, earlier layers with fresco decoration or partial plastering came to light.¹² The earlier layer in B1 was gradually retrieved from all walls of the room, from underneath the compositions of the final phase¹³. At first, the early layer was identified during the removal of the lower part of the wall painting at the east side of the north wall, which was left *in situ*

9. See fn. 8 and *Thera* II.

10. Chief conservators: I. Michailidis and A. Voulgaris. The removal of the wall painting was the collaborative work of all members of the wall paintings laboratory, headed by L. Kalambouki, and was a particularly educative experience for the new generation of conservators.

11. The painter Nikos Sepetzoglou contributed significantly to the identification of fragments through his work on the drawing reconstruction of the composition from the east wall.

12. Georma 2009: on B1, 143-6; on B6: 195-6.

13. *Thera* IV, 33.

following the removal of fragments by Marinatos; then, the early layer was found on the south wall, still *in situ*, as the last fresco layer had collapsed on the floor. Remains of this early layer were visible on the rear side of the large composition from the west mudbrick wall of the room, nowadays in the National Archaeological Museum.

This part of the early layer presents some particularities. Immediately after it came to light, Marinatos suggested that, due to its limited extent on the lower part of the walls, the fresco represented a dado imitation or a band running along the lower part of the wall. No further comments on the excavation context, its function and date were made available at that time.

This layer consists of a red to red/orange band running along the lower part of all walls of the room (fig. 6). It is 2 cm thick all along; at the upper end, the layer becomes gradually thinner and finally fades away. The lower end abutted the floor, as indicated by the thick curve of the plaster edge. The largest and best preserved surface of the red band is found on the south wall, while smaller fragments are identified also on the other walls. Parts of this layer were removed together with the rear side of the two large fragments taken off the east wall in 2002 and the west part of the north wall, whereas a large fragment remains *in situ* on the east part of the north wall.

The floor of area B1 was paved with schist slabs, what created a striking effect. Palyvou argues that the fresco band running along the walls of the room was inherently connected to the slabbed floor.¹⁴ Joins between the slabs were commonly painted in red.¹⁵ It is possible that the master builder opted for the red band in order to enhance the aesthetic effect in the room and create a visual continuity between the lower part of the walls and the red joins of the slabbed floor.¹⁶

Fragments of an earlier fresco layer were also revealed in B6, a substratum on which the plaster of the Monkeys fresco was applied (fig. 7)¹⁷. These are of excellent quality in terms of both the fineness of the plaster and the preservation of the pigments. They mainly bear geometric patterns or a monochrome slip. Unfortunately,

14. C. Palyvou, pers. comm.

15. Palyvou 1999, 207-10. She argues that the painting of the joins also covered part of the slabs. This is not a case of careless application; rather, the craftsman obviously attempted to make the irregular slabs look rectangular or square in shape for aesthetic reasons. Mortar in the joins is preserved in Room 5 of the West House and in the second storey of Xeste 4. In the area of the Porters' Lodge, slabs were found bearing traces of red mortar in the joins (*Thera* II, 29, where it is not clear whether the mention refers to the join or to fallen fresco fragments: Vlachopoulos 2007, 131-2). Moreover, during the recent excavations at the site (1999-2001), in Pillar Pit 19N (east part of Complex Delta), a slabbed floor was uncovered *in situ* preserving mortar in the joins. This technique is still in use in the Aegean islands and elsewhere, with the joins painted in white.

16. Televantou 1994, see original plan in the publication. The drawing reconstruction of the building, where the floor of Room 5 is rendered with red mortar in the joins, is illustrative. See also the digital reconstruction in Palyvou 2005, pl. 3A.

17. Doumas, Marthari and Televantou 2000, 38-9, fig. 35.

their fragmentary state of preservation hinders the restoration of the composition, as evidence for the original size and the iconography is not available.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME OF ROOM B1

The iconographic programme of the last phase in areas B1 and B6 of Building Beta was most probably created during the second and final building phase of the complex, when it assumed its definitive form. It is suggested that the compositions of the area are interlinked in thematic and ideological terms, a case similar to relevant arguments for the iconographic programmes of wall paintings revealed in other buildings at Akrotiri.

The large north window of the room constituted the starting point of a parallel processional movement of animals, unique in Akrotiri. The animals appear as if they entered the room from the Mill Square through the north window, flanking and thus enhancing the action scene taking place in the composition of the south wall, the Boxing Boys, the central composition of the iconographic programme of the area (fig. 8).¹⁸ Doumas suggests that people standing in the Mill Square, to the north of Building Beta, had visual contact with the interior of B1 through the large window; they were able to see the pairs of Antelopes on the east and west walls and the young Boxers on the south wall.¹⁹ Indeed, this would have been possible especially after the deposition of debris from seismic destructions and the rising of the level of the Mill Square.²⁰

Movement is conveyed by the “mirroring” effect of the depicted animals, in parallel from the east and west towards the south part of the room and the Boxing Boys, where a narrow door opens to the auxiliary area with the repositories filled with vases (fig. 9).²¹ The flowing effect of the animals is also enhanced by a sense of hovering created by a yellow band running along the lower part of the compositions, in which the hooves of the animals appear to sink. This sense contrasts with that emanating from the scene of the Boxing Boys, in which the figures stand firmly and with confidence on a solid level rendered by a black band.

The identification of the species of the animals as antelopes (*oryx beissa*),²² albeit with no parallels identified as yet in the iconography of Akrotiri and Crete, is based

18. Georma 2009, 189-190, fig. 78, 80. Georma et al. 2017, 477-80, figs. 6-7. Reconstruction drawings of the compositions of B1 were made by the painter A. Kontonis.

19. Doumas 2005a, 75-6, 79.

20. Sofianou and Georma forthcoming.

21. Thera IV, fig. 2, pls. 53-5 (for the repositories in B1a).

22. Trantalidou (2000, 715) identifies the animals from the B1 composition with the species *gazella dorcas* or *gazella granti*, albeit taking into consideration artistic freedom in the depiction of the animals. According to the author, the antelope is not identified in the material retrieved in Aegean sites, although an exception is the presence of one antler of *Alcelaphus buselaphus* in the Heraion on Samos.

on morphological features of the species rendered on the animals depicted, such as the horns, the head, the dorsal area, the pace and the hooves.²³ Aspects of hybridism identified in the art of Akrotiri, mainly in the rendering of fauna and flora, could be of relevance to the discussion of the depiction of the antelopes. Certainly, there is a much debated thin line between hybridism as means of rendering animal and plant motifs in Akrotiri iconography and abstraction as an artistic convention, as adopted by the painter of the compositions in B1.

With reference to the theme of the scene of the young Boxing Boys on the south wall of the room, at the entrance to the auxiliary area B1a with the repositories, suffice it to note that boxing was probably a popular sport in the life of people of that era. We presume that it was held in the context of initiation rites and perhaps other rituals, such as those illustrated in wall paintings of other buildings at Akrotiri. There are as yet no other parallels to the boxing scene from the settlement; the closest parallels are found in depictions on artefacts of other materials from Minoan Crete (Knossos, Aghia Triada),²⁴ with correlations on the movement of the bodies and their anatomy, their haircut and clothing, although the parallels from Crete depict adults and not young boys, as is the case of the wall painting from Building Beta.

A scene with two human figures depicted on a Middle Cycladic vase in Bichrome ware found at Akrotiri during the excavation of the pits for the foundation of the new roof of the site (fig. 10) ²⁵, could be discussed as the closest parallel in iconographic terms for the posture of the Boxing Boys²⁶. On the other side of the vase, a scene with a bird of prey, probably a falcon, grasping a smaller bird is depicted. Among other interpretations, that of the depiction of an initiation rite in Aegean Bronze Age iconography is proposed for this scene.

For the reasons mentioned above, the scene depicting the two boys on the west part of the south wall of room B1, apparently at the age stage for participation in initiation rites, forms the ideological context of the iconographic programme of the room. The identity of the particular ceremony is unknown to us; however, the composition with the procession of the boys and the men in the ground floor area of Room 3b in Xeste 3²⁷ provides the ideological framework also for the iconographic programme of B1.

23. It was the excavator S. Marinatos (*Thera* IV, 47, pls 117-8), immediately after the paintings were brought to light, who first identified the animals with this particular species, native in east Africa. He argued that their pointed horns, a characteristic feature of this species, were rendered with such precision so as to immediately point to the animal.

24. See Coulomb 1981 for all known parallels from Minoan Crete.

25. Doulas 2003, 171, pl. 120b-c. Boulotis 2005, 58, 61, fig. 42, 49. Doulas 2005b, 314, fig. 478. Nikolakopoulou et al. 2008. Papagiannopoulou 2008, no. 3. Vlachopoulos 2013, 116-7, fig. XXXII. Papagiannopoulou 2018, 179, figs 14a-c.

26. Georma 2018, 297, fig. 6.

27. Doulas 1992, 130, figs 109-15.

The visitor to the latter area is meant (not by chance) to take in another procession, of animals in this case, originating from the central north window and heading south in two parallel directions; this procession frames the two young boys, who, by means of the ritual, take distance from one age stage and enter the next. The association of the human to the natural element through the depiction of the animals is far from accidental, since it is widely acknowledged that human activities are rendered in Thera and Minoan art as part of and in total harmony with the natural world.²⁸

On the whole, the young boys participate in an initiation rite effectuated through boxing and are at the same time symbolically associated with the male animals, the antelopes, which exhibit vigour and strength through their posture. What the painter evidently aimed for was the harmonious integration of the compositions in the eyes of the residents or visitors from all viewpoints in the room.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAMME OF ROOM B6

A new and integrated approach was also adopted for the interpretation of the iconographic programme of the upper floor area of B6, featuring the composition of the Monkeys²⁹ (fig. 11) and that of the Goats, according to the recent identification. The latter composition was interpreted by S. Marinatos first as a scene of dogs chasing the monkeys and then as calves in a rocky landscape with swallows and crocuses (fig. 12).³⁰ The compositions and the iconographic units draw upon elements from the animal kingdom and the natural world, one of the most popular themes in Bronze Age Aegean iconography, after the depiction of humans. The human element is absent from the compositions of this area.

The Monkeys fresco dominates the area in the upper floor of B6. The monkeys go away by climbing on rocks strongly reminiscent of features of the volcanic landscape of Akrotiri.³¹ Depictions of monkeys were particularly popular in Bronze Age Aegean iconography and are attested already in the Early Bronze Age. Since the animals are not

28. Morgan 1995.

29. *Thera* IV, 46, pls. 114-5. Georma 2009, 194-215, fig. 50.

30. *Thera* IV, 46. Dumas 1992, 111, fig. 91. Georma 2009, 215-20, cat. no. 68 ("goats"). Georma et al. 2017, fig. 9. The drawings for the new proposal of the reconstruction of the Goats composition were made by the painter Maria Kriga.

31. It is not clear on which walls of the room the Monkeys fresco originally stood. The state of preservation of the area does not allow for a definitive reconstruction of the composition on the original place. The dominant view in scholarship places the composition on the north and the west walls of the room (Immerwahr 1990, 42, 185. Dumas 1992, 110-1. Dumas et al. 2000, 72). Georma et al. 2017, for the preliminary results of the architectural study. The architectural reconstruction of the area by the architect I. Bitis will be presented in the forthcoming publication of Building Beta.

native in the Aegean, the motif in Minoan art (and then in Cycladic art) is considered a loan from Egypt and Mesopotamia.³² Cretan artists apparently adopted the motif from close examination of depictions in the art of Egypt and the East. Although scholars tend to assign monkeys depicted in Aegean art with religious or cult qualities, similar to the case of those found in Egyptian depictions, in Thera art the animal is not attested as directly associated with a divinity.³³ It is represented as performing human actions, except in the case of the wall painting in Building Beta, and as an intermediary acting between human and divinity but not directly connected to a divinity, as the griffin.

At Akrotiri, besides room B6, monkeys are depicted in the building called the Porter's Lodge,³⁴ in the north area of the site and in the first floor of Rooms 2 and 3 of Xeste 3. In the fragmentary composition from the Porter's Lodge, three blue monkeys are depicted in a worshipping gesture in front of a shrine.³⁵ In the first floor of Room 2 in Xeste 3, two pairs of blue monkeys are depicted, engaged in human activities: one of the monkeys strums a string instrument, two of them hold a sword, while the last one is seated on a rock.³⁶ Finally, in the first floor of Room 3a in Xeste 3, a blue monkey offering crocuses is depicted as the intermediary between a young girl and the Potnia.³⁷

The species of the animal depicted in the Monkeys fresco in B6 is identified as that of *Cercopithecus Aethiops*,³⁸ a species with elongated body, long tail and short head with rounded muzzle. During the restoration of the composition, Marinatos noted similarities with the compositions from the House of Frescoes at Knossos and identified the subspecies in both compositions as that of *Cercopithecus Callitrichus*, identical to *Cercopithecus Sabaeus*.³⁹ Evans used the term *cynocephalus* in his references to *cercopithecus*, evidently influenced by Egyptian prototypes, and related the animal to mythical creatures or monsters.⁴⁰ However, in Egyptian art, the *cynocephalus* is identified with the *baboon* and is a different subspecies.

From the east area of B6, possibly from the same room, came other iconographic units, belonging to more than one compositions, and drawing upon the natural

32. See Papageorgiou and Birtacha 2009, 1, with references.

33. Papageorgiou and Birtacha 2009, 288-9.

34. Thera II, 27-28, plan XI, pl. 28,2. The name, in Greek *Thyoreion*, was given conventionally by the excavator S. Marinatos. The fragments of the wall painting were uncovered in 1968, the year following the retrieval of the first fragments uncovered in the area of Building Beta.

35. Dumas 1992, 184, fig. 147. Vlachopoulos 2007, 134. The number of the monkeys increased after the new reconstruction by A. Vlachopoulos.

36. Dumas 1992, 128, figs 95-6. Vlachopoulos 2008, 493, figs 41.17, 41.18.

37. Dumas 1992, 130, figs 122-28. Vlachopoulos 2008, 493, figs 41.20, 41.21.

38. Papyros-Larousse-Britannica 2007, vol. 28, entry *Cercopithecus*.

39. Thera III, 65. Thera IV, 46.

40. Evans 1925, 119, 120, 124, 683.

world: myrtle branches stemming from a black band were found on part of a mudbrick wall⁴¹ and on fresco fragments (fig. 13), and reeds on a large fresco fragment.⁴² The severe damage of the east part of the complex caused by the torrent in recent times hinders a safe approach to the reconstruction of the iconographic programme of the room(s). Nevertheless, new evidence for this part from the detailed drawing of the building and the integrated architectural study which is in progress will contribute significantly to the attribution of fragmentary iconographic themes and compositions to B6 and the smaller area B6a.⁴³ Fragments of mudbricks identified in the area, except for that with the myrtle fresco mentioned above, are indicative evidence for the reconstruction of a number of spaces of small dimensions in the area.

In the present study and with reference to the reconstruction of the iconographic programme of the entire area of B6, it is suggested that the Monkeys composition should be disassociated from the second composition with the Goats, preserved in a rather fragmentary state.⁴⁴ The composition with the Goats was enriched by restored fragments of a third animal and more plant motifs (fig. 12), while it became obvious that the fragment with the reeds belongs to another, distinct composition. Goats and wild goats are popular in Aegean iconography and together with bulls they are the most commonly depicted animals. As an individual creature or together with other animals, goats were rendered as bronze figurines, on relief stone vases, on wall paintings,⁴⁵ on pottery,⁴⁶ and quite often on Minoan and Mycenaean seals.⁴⁷ It is possible that these new compositions of smaller dimensions could have originally decorated

41. This important fragment of mudbrick wall with the myrtle branches is connected in stylistic terms with the fragments on display in the Museum for Prehistoric Thera, which are erroneously in my view attributed to Sector Gamma (Doulas 1992, 19).

42. *Thera* II, 12, pls 5.2, 6.1, 2. In the notebook of the excavation, as mentioned in the relevant *Thera* report, it is noted that the fragment representing reeds was found in the disturbed soil of the torrent between the two banks in the area called Bronou 2. Among other pieces, there are some depicting myrtle plants and a head of a blue monkey with a big circular eye. Therefore, according to the excavator, the provenance of all these fragments is the area of B6. Georma 2009, 228-34, cat. no. 77, 78, 79.

43. Georma et al. 2017, fig. 5. The architect Ioannis Bitis is responsible for the architectural study of the building which is in progress. The significance of the integrated approach in the study of architecture and wall paintings is well-known and established. All the evidence from the wall paintings study is taken in consideration for the architectural reconstruction of the building.

44. Doulas 1992, 111, fig. 91. Marinatos 1984, 113-6, figs 81, 83.

45. Park Fresco, Room 14, Aghia Triada: Evelyn 1999, 124-27, 242. Agrimia and olive tree fresco, Room 1, Knossos: Evelyn 1999, 244-5. On the depiction of wild goats in Minoan frescoes see Georma 2009, 217, with references.

46. The *asaminthos* with the hunting scene, Room 1, ground floor, Building Theta (Θ), Akrotiri: Papagiannopoulou 2008, 433-6, no. 1, figs. 40.1-4. On the depiction of wild goats in Thera pottery and glyptic art see Georma 2009, 218, with references.

47. Krzyszkowska 2005 on Cretan seals.

the upper floor areas of the west smaller room, B6a, from where a door provided access to the southwest part of the complex.

STYLISTIC MATTERS

Based on stylistic remarks further teased out below, it is argued that while the wall painting compositions of Building Beta seamlessly fit into the standard production of frescoes at Akrotiri, they do however exhibit specific traits that allow us to elaborate on the individual painter(s) who worked in this particular building.

Scholars have extensively discussed aspects of identification and comparison between elements of “Cycladic” versus “Cretan” or even “Egyptian” or “Near Eastern” tradition in the production of the wall paintings.⁴⁸ Originally, the main trend was to examine the Akrotiri frescoes and those of other sites in the Cyclades (e.g. from Phylakopi⁴⁹) under the prism of Minoan production; gradually, however, there was a shift towards the acknowledgement of an independent artistic trajectory in the islands, with distinct influence from the major centres in Crete (mainly from Knossos) and through the latter from Egypt and the Near East. The study of the artistic development and process in the formation of distinct schools and lines of production is certainly on-going, focussing on common modes and conventions the artisans used already since the Early Bronze Age. Excavations in the wider area of the Aegean, Egypt and the Near East provide new evidence and food for thought on the particular issue.⁵⁰

C. Boulotis was the first to delve into the social identity and organisation of painters in the last period of the Bronze Age, based on evidence from excavation data.⁵¹ A wide and elaborate network of “masters”, fresco painters, was at work during the Late Bronze Age in Crete (from the 17th c. onwards), the Aegean islands and in the

48. Dumas 1985. Davis 1990. Morgan 1990. Boulotis 1992. Niemeier 1992. Televantou 1994. Birtacha and Zacharioudakis 2000.

49. Bosanquet 1904, 71. Cameron 1975, 278. Hood 1978, 54. Characteristic example is the fragment of the fresco from Phylakopi with the Flying Fish, which was considered immediately after it was found as the work of a Cretan artisan, transferred from Knossos to Melos. Bosanquet argued that the fresco exhibits significant stylistic similarities with the Dolphins composition from Knossos and misinterpreted remains of wood at the edges of the plaster as parts of the portable frame used to transport the work from Crete to Melos. At that time, the process of making the wall paintings was not yet studied and as a consequence traces on the rear side of the fragments were misinterpreted. Cameron, on the other hand, explicitly describes the manufacture process and attributes the composition to the Cycladic production.

50. Wooley 1955. Niemeier and Niemeier 1998. Bietak et al. 2000.

51. Boulotis 2000. For a general discussion on attribution studies in the Aegean Prehistory, see Morris 1993.

wider area of the east Mediterranean.⁵² These artisans travelled in search of work and received payment for their labour. This practice may easily be seen in the wider context of the mobility of artisans and craftsmen, a characteristic feature of that period. In the Homeric poems,⁵³ which to a certain degree recite practices of the 2nd mill. BC, there is the first mention of artisans (*δημιουργοί*) travelling together with poets and other professionals in the Aegean in search of work (*οὔτοι γὰρ κλητοί γε βροτῶν ἐπ' ἀπείρονα γαίαν*). According to the poet, these artisans were free to wander and travel and their sojourn and work in major centres of that era influenced other forms of art.

It was this aspect of mobility that contributed significantly to the creation and establishment of a common iconographic vocabulary and, to a certain degree, to the configuration of a common stylistic genre. Certainly, there was much scope for differentiation depending on the time period, local idiosyncrasies and preferences. The configuration of a “koine” in painting is only one facet of the wider “cultural koine” identified in the art of Crete, the south Aegean islands and Mycenaean Greece from the 17th c. onwards. Wall paintings played a central role in the development of this process, mainly due to their exposure to the public eye as an ‘illustrated open book’ without text; pictures become the medium through which the painters consciously or unintentionally transmit ideas, meanings and concepts. Their travels to distant areas, exchange of pictorial motifs and the adoption of specific iconographical themes largely contribute to the consolidation of ideology and the dissemination of ideas. In this process, the person who places the commission for the adornment of the private or public building holds a decisive role, as he/she, in collaboration with the master painter, configures and dictates ideas and concepts to be expressed in the iconographical programmes materialised in the frescoes. At the same time, these artworks interact with other forms of art, such as glyptic, metalwork and pottery in various levels. The potential of workshops to produce artefacts in different materials, the artisans’ skills to work on different fields, bolstered by the dynamics of the complex system of exchange of valuable objects, significantly accelerated the expansion of the “koine”.

PAINTERS

The study of the Akrotiri wall paintings assemblage has resulted in the identification of individual painters who worked in different building units and created distinct iconographic programmes. Televantou produced an in-depth study on this matter

52. Zaccagnini 1983.

53. *Odyssey*, 16, 383-6.

and identified a number of individual painters and their 'schools'.⁵⁴ It appears that although all Theran painters abide by specific rules in the artistic production, each one succeeds in developing an individual style in the application of shared skills.

Along these lines, individual painters have been identified in the fresco assemblage of Building Beta. It seems that three painters were at work in the complex, with variable degrees of competence and skill:⁵⁵ the Antelopes Painter, the Boxing Boys Painter, who both worked in B1 and produced the respective compositions, and the Monkeys Painter and his apprentices, who worked in B6, the former creating the central composition of the room, while his helpers produced the small-scale compositions under his guidance.

The Boxing Boys Painter uses easily identifiable forms in order to render the human figures; however, the entanglement of the figures, with the superimposition of the arms, indicates the painter's intention to produce the lively boxing scene through the notion of perspective and the sense of movement, further enhanced by the hanging 'silent wave' motif. This is in fact one of the very few cases in Akrotiri art where the effect of the third dimension is hinted at, generated through the juxtaposed and superimposed arms in the characteristic movement of boxing. The same attempt is obvious in the Antelopes composition, which is attributed to the second painter. This painting stands out for the minimalism in the use of colour and the austerity in the drawing, which are however counterbalanced by the sense of hovering of the animals, conveyed by the optical effect of their hooves sinking in the yellow ground band. The notion of movement is also emphasised by the turn of the first animal's head to the back, what creates a sense of flow which is generally not encountered in the static art of wall paintings.

Much different is the work of the third painter in the building, the Monkeys Painter, who created the homonymous fresco in B6. The other motifs and compositions from the same area or the same room, the swallows, the 'goats', the myrtles on the mudbrick wall, were probably created by novices of the same 'school'. The composition of the goats is a characteristic example of work closely related in stylistic terms to the Monkeys fresco; however, it exhibits significant differences in the use of the paintbrush, colours and outlines. It is possible that this smaller composition was assigned to a novice, who worked under the supervision and the guidance of the master painter. The Monkeys fresco is considered as a Minoanising composition *par excellence*. The figures are vibrant in terms of colour, drawing and movement. Use of white is minimal; instead, a plethora of colours is attested.

54. Televantou 1992a. 1992b. Georma 2009, 138-42.

55. Georma 2009, 140-1.

PIGMENTS

The pigments used for the wall paintings of Building Beta are similar to those extensively used in the other buildings of the settlement.⁵⁶ Colours include black, red, blue and a variety of yellow ochre, such as brown, yellow, orange, yellow/orange, mainly identified in the rocky landscape of the Monkeys fresco. Pulverised mineral pigments were probably mixed with a binding organic matter, no longer traceable, whereas it is possible that the pigments were simply mixed with lime water. Organic binders could have been the egg white, fish glue, olive oil or beeswax, as attested in Egyptian wall paintings.⁵⁷ New colours were created by the mixture of basic colours, while hues were achieved by dilution with lime water. In this the Theran painters stand out as pioneers, since the Cretan painters were apparently applying only basic colours and a few tones.

Quantities of lime plaster and pulverised pigments, stored and ready to use, have been retrieved from buildings at Akrotiri.⁵⁸ The pigments were kept in the form of small discoid masses or lumps⁵⁹ or in the form of powder stored in small and large vases⁶⁰ or even in baskets (there is an impressive case of a basket filled with lime⁶¹). Yellow ochre is found in the largest quantities, as it was most commonly used by Theran painters in order to produce the yellow colour or as a component added to other basic colours to produce different hues. These are in general small quantities of pigments, most probably in hand for the painters to use on a day-to-day basis or for repairs. They certainly do not amount to the large quantities required for the needs of a group working on the decoration of a complex. No workshop for the production of pigments has been as yet identified in the settlement. It is possible that each master produced his own supplies, as is the case even until the Renaissance period, for better control of quality

56. Perdikatsis et al. 2000. Devetzi 2010.

57. Immerwahr 1990, 14. The selection of the bonding matter depended on the technique applied by each individual painter and also on the time period. During the Renaissance, for example, it was common practice to use organic binding materials in the tempera painting technique.

58. Birtacha et al. forthcoming: three groups of discoid masses of red ochre have been found: in Rooms 1a and Room 17 of Complex Delta and in a vase found in the area outside Xeste 3.

59. Birtacha et al. forthcoming, on the form of the raw material for practical reasons, such as storage or transport purposes. Standardised pigment masses were possibly traded for a specified value.

60. Devetzi 2010. Raw material in pulverised form was also identified in Building Beta. Other cases include material found in a jug filled with lime from Room 7 of the House of the Ladies, two pithoid jars with lime from Room 4a (first floor) of the West House, a cup with red powder from the same room as the two pithoid jars, and two small stone grinders from the same room, possibly used for processing lime and pigments.

61. Belogianni 2007, 60, fig. 20: this is the basket uncovered in 2001 in an outdoor area during the excavation of Pillar Pit 68A.

and pureness of the colours. For this reason, the existence of one workshop for the mass-production of pigments for the needs of all painters is not plausible.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the two iconographic programmes unfolding in the two areas of Building Beta do not exhibit any unifying elements, except perhaps that of abiding to stylistic conventions of that period. In B1, the pair of the Boxing Boys and the six Antelopes create a dense group, covering all surfaces and thus imposing itself upon the viewer. At first sight, the two compositions do not share common features and it appears that the painters did not interact. However, as already mentioned above, the two boys, possibly rendered after members of the household, are paralleled to the male animals with regard to the notion of dynamism and domination on the surrounding space. They are 'immortalised' most possibly during the *rites of passage*, when they are expected to stand out and show off. The same remark is also valid for the male animals, which are depicted in a posture showing prominence and vigour amidst their flock. The parallel route of the animals, starting from the north window of the room ends through the walls to the south part and the young boys, which are then probably meant to be under the protection of the animals.

In the iconography of this period, religion constitutes the main interpretation axis of the symbols and acts depicted⁶². 'Sacred' or 'ritual' practices are rendered in small-scale and large-scale painting and, as evidenced in the iconographic programmes of other buildings in the settlement, the choice of the themes is far from random. The central zone of the compositions is dedicated to depictions inherently related to the community, its values, symbolism and rules. Beholders of these images were most likely able to grasp at first sight the potential symbolism of the compositions. Painters, in collaboration with the commissioners, adopted pictorial motifs and elements intelligible and familiar to the beholders, drawing upon snapshots from everyday and sacred life in the specific social and ritual context; as a result, large-scale painting became the principal medium for the transmission and diffusion of symbols, ideas and meanings. The antelope was most probably not a common animal in the Aegean fauna; however, its similarity to the wild goat rendered the motif familiar to the viewers. In this light, it is possible that the owner of the residence also endorsed the 'exotic' quality of the animal, a quality with which he may have been familiar during his travels.

This 'exotic' element was perhaps the connecting link with the iconographic programme of B6 and the composition of the Monkeys. Monkeys did not exist in the

62. Boulotis 2005. Marinatos 1984.

Aegean and there is no archaeological testimony for their presence, even as imported kept animals. The frequent depiction of the motif in large-scale painting and glyptic art in Aegean art, either indirectly testifies to their actual presence in the area or, on the other hand, indicates the mobility of the artisans and the adoption of features from other areas they visited during their travels.

In the case of the B6 composition, the monkeys are depicted in their natural setting, in a rocky landscape, and are differentiated from the other depictions in the settlement rendering the animals acting and behaving as humans. In Building Beta, the monkeys behave as animals and take off in haste towards an unknown direction; the reason for fleeing is not specified. It is probably a threat not rendered by the painter or perhaps the threat is supposed to come from the approaching viewer, who is in this case involved and drawn into the composition, as he/she stands in the centre of the room taking part in the scene.

According to the new reconstruction proposal, in the wider area of B6 there was a second composition which depicted at least three small goats standing in a rocky landscape with crocuses, reeds and swallows flying over their heads. Unfortunately in this case, it was not possible to reconstruct with certainty the relation between the iconographic motifs, as the host architectural features do not survive. The mudbrick wall with the myrtle composition also comes from this area, but the exact original location is unknown.

The practice of the inhabitants of Akrotiri to decorate their buildings, private and public, with wall paintings reaches a floruit during the early Late Bronze Age. This craft combines the embellishment of interior areas of the buildings with recreation and educational purposes, as different compositions become the medium through which the artists unfold a whole world of symbols, ideas and meanings. The compositions evoked and conveyed ideas, legible and familiar to the eyes of the community members in a common language for the beholders of that era. This study has sought to decipher this common language applied on the wall paintings of the rooms in Building Beta, taking under consideration all the available elements in use by the communities of that period in the Aegean and at Akrotiri in particular, and to propose a new reading for the understanding of the iconography applied in the rooms of the building.

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ΦΡΑΓΚΟΥΛΑ ΓΕΩΡΜΑ
e-mail: frag_georma@yahoo.gr

ΟΙ ΤΟΙΧΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΚΤΗΡΙΟ ΒΗΤΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΚΡΩΤΗΡΙΟΥ ΘΗΡΑΣ. ΜΙΑ ΝΕΑ ΠΡΟΣΕΓΓΙΣΗ ΣΤΟ ΕΙΚΟΝΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΟ ΠΡΟΓΡΑΜΜΑ

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η συστηματική ανασκαφή στο Ακρωτήρι Θήρας ξεκίνησε το 1967 από τον Σπυρίδωνα Μαρινάτο και από το 1975 συνεχίστηκε από τον Χρίστο Ντούμα. Η ανασκαφή του Κτηρίου Βήτα ξεκίνησε την άνοιξη του 1967 και ολοκληρώθηκε το καλοκαίρι του 1973. Το κτήριο αποκάλυψε τοιχογραφίες σε δύο χώρους, στο Δωμάτιο 1 και στο Δωμάτιο 6. Το καλοκαίρι του 2002, μικρής έκτασης επεμβάσεις έγιναν στο Δωμάτιο 1, στο πλαίσιο της μελέτης του τοιχογραφικού συνόλου του κτηρίου, προκειμένου να απομακρυνθούν τα τμήματα των τοιχογραφιών που είχαν παραμείνει στη θέση τους από την πρώτη ανασκαφική περίοδο.

Η μελέτη των τοιχογραφιών αποκάλυψε παλαιότερο στρώμα τοιχογράφησης, διαφορετικής έκτασης και ποιότητας, και στους δύο χώρους. Στο παρόν άρθρο, επιχειρείται μία συνολική παρουσίαση και επανεκτίμηση των δύο τοιχογραφικών συνόλων του κτηρίου, όπως διαμορφώθηκε μετά τη μελέτη του υλικού: οι συνθέσεις των νεαρών πυγμάχων και των αντιλοπών, των πιθήκων και των μοσχαριών, επανεξετάστηκαν και συμπληρώθηκαν, ενώ νέες συνθέσεις και μοτίβα εντοπίστηκαν και προστέθηκαν στο εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα των δύο χώρων.

Εξετάζονται και επισημαίνονται μορφολογικά και αισθητικά ζητήματα των τοιχογραφιών του κτηρίου προκειμένου τα σύνολα να ενταχθούν στη θηραϊκή και αιγαιακή τοιχογραφική παραγωγή της ίδιας περιόδου, γενικότερα, και του οικισμού του Ακρωτηρίου, ειδικότερα, και παράλληλα γίνεται προσπάθεια ταύτισης των ζωγράφων, σύμφωνα με τα χαρακτηριστικά που έχουν διαμορφωθεί για την παραγωγή του οικισμού. Τέλος, προσδιορίζονται τα τεχνικά κατασκευαστικά χαρακτηριστικά των συνθέσεων του κτηρίου, σύμφωνα με παλαιότερες μελέτες, μακροσκοπικό και εργαστηριακό έλεγχο.



Fig. 1. General view of the excavation at Akrotiri in 1969. Building B was uncovered in the plot Bronos 1 (from NE).



Fig. 2. Site plan of Akrotiri.



Fig. 3. Plan of Building B (reconstructed by the architect Giannis Bitis).



Fig. 4. Excavation of the first fragments wall painting that came to light on the site in B6.

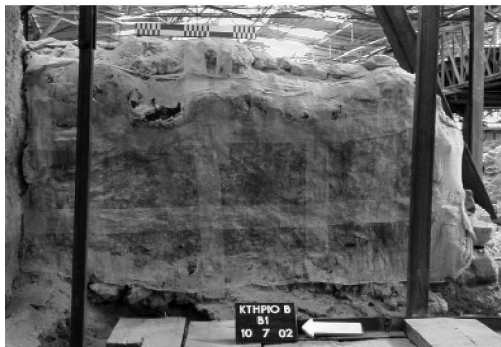


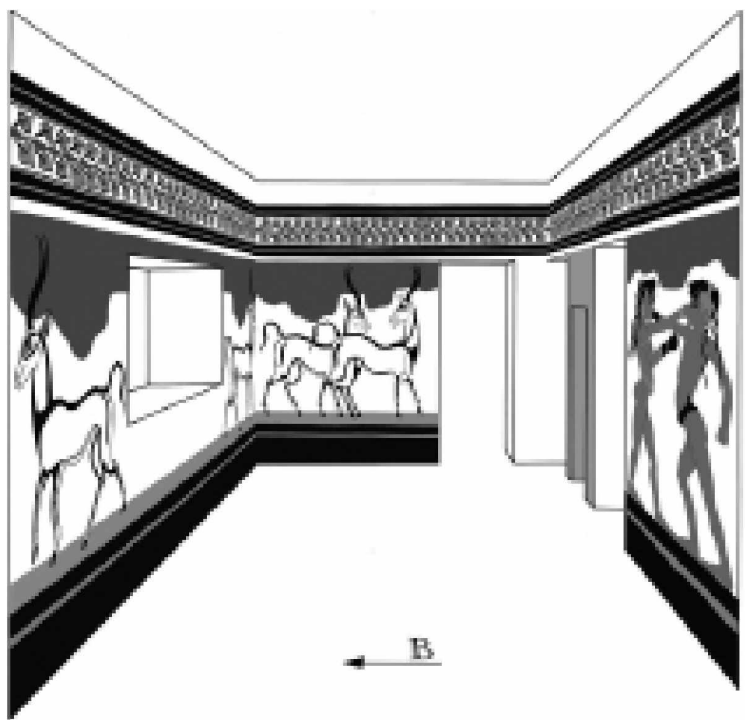
Fig. 5. The remaining part of the antelopes' fresco from the east wall of B1 before its removal in the summer of 2002.



Fig. 6. The red band of plaster of the earlier phase at the lower part of the north wall of B1.



Fig. 7. Fragments of wall paintings of the earlier phase from B6.



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Fig. 8. Perspective representation of B1 (drawing by Andreas Kontonis).



Fig. 9. The repositories with the vases in B1a.

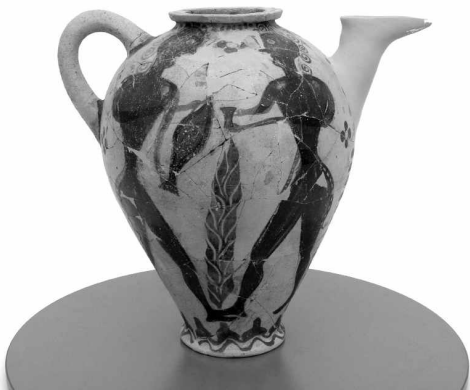


Fig. 10. The libation jag from the pillar pit 67.



Fig. 11. The monkeys wall painting from B6.



Fig. 12. Reconstruction of the goats wall painting from B6 (drawing by Maria Kriga).

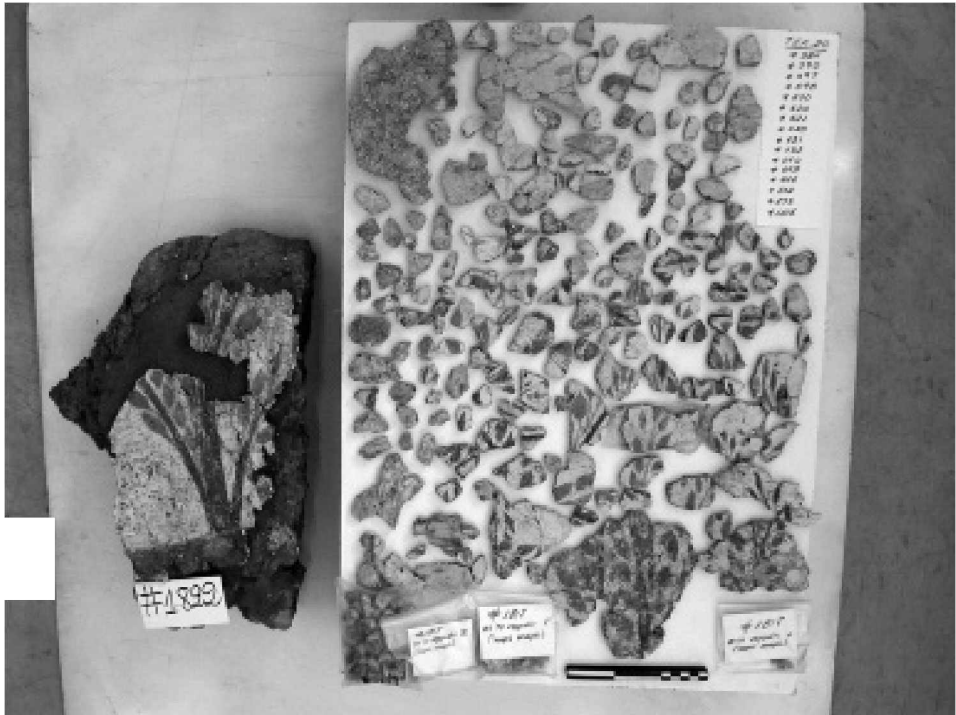


Fig. 13. Fragments of myrtles from B6.