Fundstellen

Gesammelte Schriften
zur Archäologie und Geschichte Altvorderasiens
ad honorem Hartmut Kühne

Herausgegeben von
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und F. Janoscha Kreppner

2008

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

ISBN 978-3-447-05770-7

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BETWEEN THE AEGEAN AND SYRIA: THE WALL PAINTINGS FROM THE ROYAL PALACE OF QATNA

This paper is presented to Hartmut Kühne, who directed my interests and my professional path to the archaeology of Syria.

Introduction

In the seasons between 2000 and 2004 the Syrian-German Mission at Tell Mishrife/Qatna[1] discovered thousands of fragments of colourful wall paintings in the Royal Palace of Qatna. Their discovery radically changed the picture of the technological and iconographical spectrum of wall paintings in Late Bronze Age Syria, since, for the first time, they provide evidence for close contact with the Aegean wall painting tradition from the perspective of a site in Central Inland Syria. This observation stimulates discussions on the technological transfer, cultural communication and artistic interaction between the Aegean and Syria.

The wall paintings of Qatna have been intensively studied in the framework of a project financed by the Institute of Aegean Prehistory (INSTAP) at Philadelphia entitled: "*Minoan or Minoizing Wall Paintings from Inland Syria: A Study on the Interregional Exchange of Techniques and Ideas in the 2nd Millennium BC*". The archaeological study of the wall paintings including the reconstruction of motifs and the investigation of the relations to Aegean art was undertaken by Constance von Rüden between 2003 and 2006 in the context of her dissertation.[2] Ann Brysbaert carried out scientific analyses of the plaster, the pigments and other technological features of the wall paintings, particularly in comparison to Aegean fresco techniques.[3]

This article mainly intends to present the results of a preliminary study of the paintings made by the author in 2001 accompanied by a series of lectures. The results of this first study were the onset for initiating the extensive study project mentioned above. Additionally, the article picks out some of the results of the studies by C. von Rüden and A. Brysbaert (explicitly quoted at the relevant places), as far as they entered into the general discussion within the project. In particular, the explanatory model developed by C. von Rüden will be presented here for the first time, in the form of a separate paragraph under her authorship, being contrasted to the ideas of the author. With the presentation of these different arguments the article wants to stimulate a hopefully intensive future discussion within the larger scientific community. The article, however, does not intend to present a synthesis of the results achieved in this project. This will be reserved for a publication currently being prepared by C. von Rüden and A. Brysbaert, which will also contain the realized reconstructions of large areas of the painted decoration.

1 Directed jointly by Michel al-Maqdissi (Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums, Damascus) and Peter Pfälzner (University of Tübingen).

2 Constance von Rüden, „Die Wandmalereien von Tall Mišrife/Qatna im Kontext interregionaler Kommunikation", Dissertation University of Freiburg 2006; in preparation for publication as volume I of the series „Qatna Studien" (forthcoming).

3 Final report of her studies on the Qatna painted plaster in preparation for „Qatna Studien" Vol. I; for previous work see: Brysbaert 2007a; 2007b; Brysbaert/Melessanaki/Anglos 2006.

The location of wall paintings in the Royal Palace

The fragments were distributed over large parts of the Royal Palace (Rooms M, AU, AT, DA, BW, EB, BL and Hall C), the largest quantity however, nearly 3000 single pieces, were found in Room U, which was the well-room of the palace[4] (Fig. 1). The fragments were embedded within the debris which fell into the shaft of the well during the final destruction of the palace. They were clearly concentrated on the eastern side of the well shaft and were associated with the debris of a floor, which had slid into the well from the adjoining room on the eastern side (Room N). Thus, the floor was once located within Room N, as were the wall paintings which formerly adorned the walls of Room N.

Room N was a rather small room compared to other units of the palace. It was 8 m long, but only 4 m wide, and accessible from the east, on the long side of the room, through a wide doorway which probably had a column in the middle of the entrance. As C. von Rüden argues on the basis of her reconstructions, the room must have been adorned with wall paintings on the western and southern wall. Furthermore, she suggests that the long reconstructable stretch with the turtles (see below) must have been attached to the foot of a wall of Room N, since the backside of these pieces show the rounded junction between a vertical wall and a horizontal floor.

It is not plausible, however, that this lively figurative paining was actually located at floor level of the room, where it would have been difficult to admire and, moreover, would have been exposed to easy damage and quick decay. The painted orthostat imitation would, furthermore, have excluded the positioning of a figurative scene below it at the foot of the wall. For this reason, it is much more plausible that the turtle painting was located within a niche at a slightly elevated level. It would have adorned the backside of the niche at the junction to the base of the recess. In this position the turtle frieze would have been well visible, and protected at the same time.

What is remarkable is the fact that the topics of the wall paintings in Room N are related to water (fish, crab, turtles, water course, garden; see below), with the room situated immediately adjoining the large palace well (Room U). Although the two rooms were not connected to each other by a doorway, and not even accessible from each other by a short passage, the relation of the two units to water seems to hint at a functional connection. How this connection was specifically defined remains speculative. One could imagine that Room N had a cultic function related to the well, which could mean, for example, that it was a kind of well-sanctuary. The place of discovery of the famous bronze figurine from Qatna in the Louvre, representing a seated deity, is reported to have been located in the immediate vicinity of this place.[5] This furthermore supports the idea of a religious function of this area of the Royal Palace.

The fact that a direct connection between the two rooms is missing does not necessarily provide an argument against this hypothesis, since a possible window opening could at least have made communication or interaction between the two units feasible. If one assumes, on the basis of the arguments for the location of the turtle frieze (see above), that a niche existed in Room N, this niche could have contained the window towards the shaft of the well-room. As the turtle frieze was, as far as it could be reconstructed, approximately 4 m long, the niche for the window must have been at a minimum 4 m wide. It could have been inserted

4 Novák/Pfälzner 2001: 183-185; 2002a: 226-231; 2002b: 95; Pfälzner 2007b: 38-39.

5 Pfälzner 2007b: 38.

in the middle part of the 8 m long western wall of Room N.[6] The fact that the turtle frieze is maximally 30 cm high could be explained by assuming a window or a wide wall opening located at the back side of the niche. The turtle frieze would thus have decorated a 30 cm high balustrade below the window opening at the back side of the niche. In this position the turtle scene with the water course would have recalled the water source, which was actually located behind the window at the base of the well-shaft. The wide opening of Room N towards the well room could have allowed for a cultic or ritual interaction between the two units, if the hypothesis of Room N being a small sanctuary is valid.

Archaeological dating

The date of the wall paintings from Room N is determined by the dating of the utilization phases of the palace building. A clear *terminus ante quem* is the destruction of the palace around 1340 BC,[7] which caused the abandonment of the building and the complete collapse of the walls. At this time they fell into the shaft of the adjoining well room together with other contemporary Late Bronze Age inventory of the palace. The reconstruction of a larger area of painted plaster by C. von Rüden brought to light that a continuous dark-grey line runs diagonally across the reassembled fragments, caused by a burning roof beam that had fallen against the still standing wall during the destruction. This proves that the wall paintings were still on the wall when the catastrophe happened.

On the other side, the construction date of the palace in the MB IIA period (the 18/17th cent. BCE)[8] marks a *terminus post quem* for the paintings. Within this wide chronological scope from around 1700 until 1340 BC any date for the execution of the wall paintings is principally possible, since throughout the long use of the palace for more than 350 years no major architectural modifications of the building are observable. Thus, secondary, non-stratigraphic arguments have to be brought forward for establishing a date of the paintings.

C. von Rüden develops her argument mainly on the basis of an observation of the preservation of the paintings and on the basis of theoretical considerations concerning the principal durability of painted plaster on a wall. She comes to the conclusion that the paintings could not have been longer on the wall than approximately 50 years. Therefore, she suggests a date of around 1400 BC for the execution of the paintings.

The present author is convinced that the paintings could have principally stayed on the wall for a much longer period, possibly for even up to 200 years. This opinion is founded on the specific fastening technique of the plaster. The backside of the lime plaster is dotted in short distances with "fingers" made of lime (Fig. 2), which formerly had encroached into the thick clay plaster of the wall.[9] They were produced by impressions of human fingers being pressed into the still wet clay plaster. During the following attachment of the lime plaster, which served as the surface for the paintings, these impressions were filled out with lime. Thus, the heavy

6 In contrast, C. von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2) argues for a localisation of the turtle frieze on the southern wall of Room N, because – among other reasons – most of the fragments belonging to it where found within the shaft of the well at a position which is in line with the southern end of the room.

7 For the destruction time see: Novák/Pfälzner 2003: 133-135; Richter 2003.

8 For the construction date see: Dohmann-Pfälzner/Pfälzner 2006; 2007; Pfälzner 2007b.

9 Novák/Pfälzner 2002a: 226-227.

lime plaster with the paintings was firmly attached to the wall through this kind of anchoring technique. The effect was further increased by the fact that the holes for the anchors were obliquely positioned into the wall with an inclination downwards, so that the plaster was hanging in a stable position on the lime anchors. The sophisticated fastening of the plaster aimed for a particularly long durability of the paintings. If no water and other effects of erosion acted on and weakened the wall, what is normally ensured in a roofed room, this kind of attachment should be permanent for some hundred years.[10] The fact that there is a mud brick wall behind the clay plaster is not contradicting this assumption, because the homogeneity of the clay materials guarantees a stable adherence of the mud plaster under constantly dry conditions.[11]

The surface of the painted plaster fragments is clean and smooth, with only few scratches and holes, and the colours are still very vivid. Again, this can not be seen as evidence that the paintings were only for a short time on the wall. In a room which was used as a sanctuary or for another kind of ceremonial and respectful activity – which is evoked by the high quality painted decoration – it can be expected that the walls are not exposed to major physical damages during regular use. The surface of the plaster is very dense and even partly polished[12] making it very robust and durable. The painting is partly carried out in fresco technique (see below) which strongly connects the painted layer to the subsurface. The good preservation of the painted plaster fragments is thus not surprising, and the colours themselves did not even suffer a remarkable fading during the 3300 years of deposition in the earth. This is another indication that the paintings could possibly have been in their place for a long time before the destruction of the palace at around 1340 BC.

Leaving constraints due to an assumed short durability of the wall paintings aside, the date of the wall paintings within the given time scope can best be established through art historic arguments. The majority of good parallels from the Aegean region to single motifs of the Qatna paintings date – on the basis of the examples presented below – mainly to the Late Minoan (LM) IA period, and, to a minor extent, to the phases directly before and after.[13] Therefore, a date for the execution of the Qatna paintings parallel to or shortly after the LM IA period is most plausible. The absolute date of this period varies according to the chronology used for the Aegean cultures. Within the traditional system of the Aegean Low Chronology[14] LM IA is dated to 16th cent. BC (ca. 1580-1520), according to the Aegean High Chronology[15] LM IA is attributed to the 17th cent. BC (ca. 1675-1600). As this debate is not settled within Aegean Archaeology, a secure absolute date for the Qatna paintings can not be directly deduced from these parallels. Therefore, a preliminary general assignment of the Qatna paintings to the 16th

10 Compare, for example, the much less firmly attached mural paintings in the graves of Palmyra (Syria), the churches of Göreme (Turkey), and other ancient and medieval sites and buildings.

11 This clearly contradicts the opinion of Bietak (2007: 273) that mud brick walls would not provide a stable setting for hard plaster for centuries, from which he deduces a date of the Qatna paintings in the 14th cent. BC (Bietak 2007: footnote 35).

12 Observations by Wilfried Reinemann and C. von Rüden.

13 In a slightly different approach, C. von Rüden (2006) could determine a time range from MM III to LM II for many of the Aegean stylistic and motif-based features retrievable in the Qatna paintings, and generally takes a still wider overall time span for Aegean parallels of the Qatna material into account (forthcoming).

14 Warren/Hankey 1989: 137-148; Bietak 2003.

15 Manning 1999: Fig, 6, Tables 1, 2.

or the early 15th cent. BC is preferred, which is more plausible from the regional and local perspective and which would mean that the painted plaster was in place for about 150-200 years before the palace was destroyed. The paintings would thus have to be chronologically placed around the turn of the Middle Bronze IIB to the Late Bronze I period in Syria.

The Aegean Elements

One of the major elements of comparison between the Qatna paintings and those from the Aegean, mainly Minoan sphere, is the technique. As A. Brysbaert has definitely found out,[16] a large number of the paintings from Qatna were carried out in fresco technique. However, this technique was not exclusively used, since there are also many pieces showing secco technique. It can be argued that the secco-parts were generated in those cases where the plaster had already dried before the painting was finished. Still, the fresco technique used in parts of the paintings must be seen as clear evidence for an import of this Aegean technique to Syria. It is not the first evidence of fresco technique in Syria and its immediate surroundings, since the paintings from Alalakh Level VII, being slightly older than the Qatna paintings (MB II), already show use of the same technique.[17]

Another clear hint to Aegean technique is string impressions, which could be identified by C. von Rüden and A. Brysbaert on several of the Qatna plaster fragments. They are part of a typically Aegean method to create horizontal border lines for the single scenes and to subdivide the painting surface.[18] Again, this method was not constantly used at Qatna, but only on a restricted number of examples. A third typical feature, which relates the Qatna paintings to Aegean examples, is the polishing of parts of the surface of the painted motifs.

Within the repertoire of motifs of the wall paintings from Room N there are a number of elements which show a clear connection to Aegean paintings of the Middle and Late Bronze Age. A first noticeable element is a border pattern consisting of two parallel thick red-brown bands (Fig. 3) being prominent on the painted plaster from Qatna. Both bands are framed by thin black contour lines. This kind of border is frequently found on Minoan frescoes in a similar manner, for example in the paintings from Akrotiri on Thera.[19] They date to the LM IA period.

There is another panel fragment from Qatna consisting of an ochre-red field bordered by a gray-blue line, framed by black contour lines. This combination of colours and composition of borders is very reminiscent of the framings of figurative Aegean painted fields, such as the fisherman fresco from Akrotiri[20] and of the famous fresco "La Petite Parisienne" from Knossos,[21] both dating to the LM I period.

Many pieces from Room N show a very dense and irregular decoration painted in white colour on black background (Fig. 4). It can be interpreted either as basalt stone imitation, as C. von Rüden (2006) suggests, or as a dense field of flowers, an idea which the author proposed[22] and still regards as a possible alternative explanation beside the idea of a basalt imita-

16 Publication in preparation.
17 Niemeier/Niemeier 1998: 69-71, 82ff.; Feldman 2007: 39ff.
18 Immerwahr 1990; Brysbaert 2002; 2007b: 341.
19 Doumas 1995: Fig. 8, 109-111, 114, 127, 139-141.
20 Doumas 1995: 22-23.
21 Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Pl. XVI.
22 Novák/Pfälzner 2002a: 227-228.

tion.[23] The motif consists of twisted and curved lines often crossing each other and sometimes forked at the end. This decor is executed in a cursory, nearly impressionistic, watercolour like style. Particularly noteworthy is the contrast of the white paint on the dark ground. These features are typical for flower and grass patterns of Aegean paintings, as it is demonstrated on flower paintings from Knossos[24] (Fig. 5), in a similar manner even on the lily-painting from Amnissos on Crete,[25] or in Minoan pottery decorations.[26] These comparisons date to the Middle Minoan (MM) II-III period, as in the case of Knossos and Amnissos, or to the transition from MM III to LM I, as in the case of the vessel from Zakros on Crete.

Clearly representing a marble imitation is the painting discovered by Du Mesnil du Buisson and published in a colour drawing in 1935[27] (Fig. 6). It is reported to have been found to the east of the "Salle des deux bases"[28] (Room X in our plan Fig. 1), which corresponds to the area of Rooms R, AG and AV. The two published fragments show a decoration of wavy bands in a roughly triangular composition, but with softly rounded edges, consisting of a number of undulating, parallel dark-red and black lines. Du Mesnil du Buisson[29] and later authors[30] classified this style as "Mittani". However, the motif exactly matches the marble imitations from Akrotiri with regard to both the colours and the undulating lines in a general semicircular or triangular arrangement[31] (Fig. 7). They date to the LM IA period, thus giving another indication for chronological parallelism of the Qatna paintings to the beginning of the Late Minoan period. It can be added, that a similar fragment was also found (in unstratified context) in the western half of the well-room U of the Royal Palace of Qatna indicating that the same marble imitation decor might have also existed in rooms around the well.

Very prominent within the Qatna paintings from Room N is a tendril of fine leaves, which is referred to as the "foliate band" in Aegean art being wide-spread in this region. The Qatna examples are painted in black on a white background (Fig. 8), but it is also attested at Qatna with white leaves on red. The slightly curved leaves are attached symmetrically to both side of the thin, straight-lined twig. The motif is framed on both sides by a straight line which separates the tendril band from adjoining geometric patterns of black curved lines and red half-circles. This kind of tendril is a very popular motif of Minoan wall decoration, which is known for example from the palace of Knossos[32] (Fig. 9), where it is also joined by oblique lines. Representations are also found on pottery and metal vessels of the LM IA/LH I period in the Aegean[33] (Fig. 10).

23 As can be seen on another fragment from Qatna, which doubtlessly represents a stone imitation (Fig. 6), there is a different way of depicting stone at Qatna (see below). It is, however, also possible – as a third explanation offering a compromise between the first ones – that the impressionistic "flower style" painting of Aegean type as evidenced on the Qatna piece (Fig. 4) was used at Qatna to represent a basalt imitation.
24 Evans 1967: Pl. D.2; I; VIII.3.
25 Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Pl. XXIII.
26 Evans 1964: Vol. II.2, Fig. 279.
27 Du Mesnil du Buisson 1935: frontispice.
28 Du Mesnil du Buisson 1935: 143.
29 Du Mesnil du Buisson 1935: frontispiece and p. 143.
30 Nunn 1988: 97.
31 Doumas 1995: Fig. 14-17, 49-56, 63-64.
32 Evans 1967: Pl. E.1.
33 Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Fig. 83, 88, 216 (below); Hawes 1908: Pl. VII.32.

The most characteristic motif of the paintings from Room N is the spiral frieze (Fig. 11) of which many fragments could be reassembled by C. von Rüden to at least two larger fields of running spirals. The spirals on one frieze are more accurate than the ones on the other frieze, which was more carelessly executed, clearly demonstrating that, at least, two differently trained craftsmen were involved in the painting of Room N. The spirals are painted with thin black lines covering an equally thin red line. In different parts the red or the grey line remains visible. These thin lines which connect one spiral to the next circulate twice within each spiral. In the centre of each spiral the two lines coming from the adjoining spirals on both sides do not overlap. The triangular gaps between the spirals are filled with a trifoliate leaf.

This composition of a spiral frieze perfectly matches examples from the Aegean. The most famous ones are the spiral friezes from different rooms of the palace of Knossos[34], which are generally dated to the Late Minoan I period (Fig. 12). The closest parallel to Qatna can be found at Akrotiri on Thera,[35] also dated to the LM IA period (Fig. 13). Here, one can observe the same arrangement of thin, elegant lines not overlapping in the centre of the spiral, and the same way of a shifting from red to gray lines in each spiral. The motif is still very popular in very much the same arrangement during the Mycenaean time, as is shown on the fresco of the shields from Tiryns, dated to the Late Helladic III A/B period[36] (14th-13th cent. BC). The spiral frieze is known in "indigenous" Near Eastern painting as well, as is shown on the throne podium in Room 64 of the palace of Mari.[37] However, the design of this motif in Mari is much rougher, less accurate and less fine than at Qatna or in the Aegean. This demonstrates that the Qatna examples of the spiral frieze are stylistically much closer related to the foreign Aegean model than to the regional Mari model, the latter one possibly having been independently derived from earlier Aegean examples of the motif.

The most significant single motif of Aegean derivation at Qatna is a palm tree with blue leaves (Fig. 14). The palm has slightly curved branches being painted in light blue colour and surrounded by a thin red contour line. There are two other fragments which also show blue leaves and, in addition, a red twig and a dense cloud of red dots in a very impressionistic rendering. The latter had provisionally been interpreted as representing a thick twig of dates. This idea could be confirmed by C. von Rüden (2006) when reassembling the palm tree nearly completely from many fragments. The use of the colour blue – instead of green – for representations of leaves, especially of palm trees, can be seen as a distinctive feature of Aegean painting tradition.

The specific rendering of this motif at Qatna finds a perfect parallel in palm tree depictions on Aegean frescoes. The most similar example is again from Akrotiri on Thera (Fig. 15), which shows the gently curved blue branches, the dates made of red dots and the brown stem in a very similar rendering.[38] However, the red contour lines are missing on this piece from Akrotiri, being substituted by a very fine, only partly visible grey contour line. Another palm representation on the famous miniature fresco from Akrotiri[39] has two stems, with a

34 Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Fig. 39; Evans 1964: Vol. III, Pl. XXIII, Fig. 221-222, 228-229, 252-254.
35 Doumas 1995: Fig. 93-94.
36 Immerwahr 1990: Pl. XIX.
37 Parrot 1958a: 105-106, 1958b: 67-69, Fig. 54, Pl. 15.
38 Doumas 1995: Fig. 148.
39 Doumas 1995: Fig. 31.

gray contour line at the lower edge of the blue branches of one stem and a red contour line on the equally blue branches of the other one (Fig. 20).[40] These two convincing parallels for the Qatna paintings refer again to the LM IA period making this time (the transition of Middle Bronze II to Late Bronze I in Syria) the most plausible chronological frame for a direct contact between the Aegean painters and the artists at Qatna (see below). The palm tree motif is also known from Tell ed-Dabᶜa/Avaris in Egypt,[41] where the gently curved leaves are also painted in blue. For the Tell ed-Dabᶜa frescoes a date during the Tuthmoside period (ca. 1500-1450 BC) and a direct connection to Minoan frescoes has been established.[42] The difference from the Syrian manner of depicting palm trees becomes evident, if one looks at the palms on the wall paintings in the Palace of Mari from the Middle Bronze IIA period.[43] Here, the branches of the palm tree are painted in green colour and they are made up of single thin leaves on both sides of each branch, thus representing a completely different style of representation.

Other fragments, which C. von Rüden could connect with the palm trees to one large scene, depict rocks and grass (Fig. 16).[44] The rocks are characterized by a grey undulating thick line, which marks the contours of a rocky landscape. Below this band are alternating grey and red thin, short lines, principally vertical, but often slightly waved as if they were swaying. They indicate grass and flowers growing in the rocky landscape. In this, again, the typical rendering of Minoan landscapes is reflected. Good examples are known from the palace of Knossos, as on the so-called "saffron gatherer" fresco[45] which represents a rocky landscape presumably populated by monkeys (Fig. 17). Here, we can observe a thick grey line in S-shaped bends indicating the contour of rocks in an astonishingly similar way as on the Qatna piece. In the rocky landscape are flowers with swaying stalks. Although this fresco from Knossos is conventionally dated to the Middle Minoan II/III period[46] (Middle Bronze Age), thus being older than the other mentioned parallels, it represents a very close parallel to Qatna. The rocky landscapes from Akrotiri, dating to the LM IA period and thus being slightly later than the Knossos example, are principally similar, as well.[47] However, the rocks are not only indicated by a grey contour line, as at Qatna, but are homogenously filled with another colour. Despite of this minor difference, the impressionistic realization of the rocky landscape, and even the specific way of rendering the undulating contour lines, are very closely comparable at Akrotiri and Qatna.

It is noteworthy that the palm tree scene at Qatna is framed by an oblique band consisting of overlapping ovals painted in red and blue with white interspaces (Fig. 14). They are inserted between two red thin border lines. This decor is known from Minoan paintings such as the bull-leaper fresco from Knossos[48] (Fig. 18) and a spiral frieze from Akrotiri[49] (Fig. 13). In both pictures it forms a band-like border and is inserted in between two parallel thin lines.

40 C. von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2) found out during her restoration of the fragments from Qatna, that here the palm tree consisted even of three stems originating from one spot.
41 Bietak/Marinatos/Palyvou 2007: Fig. 59A; Marinatos 2007: 146 ff., Fig. 138.
42 Bietak 2007: 273, 288-289.
43 Parrot 1958b; Hrouda 1991: Fig. on p. 341.
44 Novák/Pfälzner 2002a: 228-229.
45 Evans 1967: Pl. I.
46 Evans 1964: 1967.
47 Doumas 1995: Fig. 69, 71.
48 Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Pl. XVII.
49 Doumas 1995: Fig. 93-94.

Concluding from these two examples the overlapping ovals seem to have been a popular decorative pattern in the Aegean during the LM I period.

The turtles which mark the most peculiar motif of the Qatna paintings are not known from Aegean wall decorations (see below). When we look at the turtle fragments it becomes visible that they are integrated in a landscape scene (Fig. 19). They walk on the undulating surface of a red-brown area which fills out the lower part of the frieze-shaped figurative band.[50] It is to be interpreted as a hilly land. Below there is a smaller undulating field in grey-blue colour. This two-zoning of the landscape is a typical feature of Minoan landscapes, such as can be seen on the miniature fresco from Akrotiri[51] (Fig. 20-22). Here, an undulating river is bordered by a landscape in the form of a broad equally undulating stripe of yellow-brownish colour representing land. Beside it, at the lower edge of the Akrotiri landscape, there are more representations of soft hills with a stripe of blue colour being added to yellow and red coloured undulating stripes as if they were indicating different levels of the landscape (Fig. 20, 22). This is exactly the same rendering as on the Qatna turtle frieze. When observing the Akrotiri landscape in detail one finds analogies to the curious arc-shaped and oval attachments on top of the undulating red stripe of land to the right of turtles. They are to be found in a strikingly similar way on the Akrotiri miniature landscape, where it is obvious that they represent stone and grass bordering a river[52] (Fig. 22). Thus we can interpret the two strange shapes at Qatna as a thick grass-type of plant (left) and a stone with grass-type of plant (right).[53] The white area above the red-brown landscape must be interpreted as water, because a fish is depicted here, only partly preserved with the lower body and the lower part of the rear fin being visible. As there are also red-brown areas in the less well preserved upper part of the frieze, one is lead to think that the water is indicating a narrow river, much in the same way as on the Akrotiri miniature landscape[54]. This is furthermore supported by the fact that the maximum preserved height of this painting is 30 cm, while it is preserved over a length of four meters. This leaves little more space than for an undulating river course in a roughly horizontal arrangement. Again, this would place the Qatna turtle landscape frieze close to the Akrotiri landscape frieze which is similarly low (21 cm) and also very long (1.75 m). In this interpretation of the Qatna turtle frieze, the fish would swim in the river while the turtles would walk on the landscape beside the river.[55] The feet of the turtles, elusively painted in grey-blue colour, are clearly placed on the reddish ground. The two turtles are overlapping each other, as are the two stags running along a river of the Akrotiri miniature frieze.[56]

To the same frieze at Qatna belongs the drawing of a crab (Fig. 23). It is executed as a contour drawing with thin black lines, hardly visible because of the elusive drawing and the slight fading of the colour. The inside of the animal is not filled with any colour. It consists

50 Novák/Pfälzner 2001: 183; 2002a: 229.
51 Doumas 1995: Fig. 31-32.
52 Doumas 1995: Fig. 32 (stones), Fig. 33 (grass, on left side of picture), Fig. 34 (grass; bottom left).
53 Alternatively, C. von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2) interprets these forms as elements of an underwater landscape.
54 Novák/Pfälzner 2002a: 229.
55 Opposed to this interpretation C. von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2) wants to see the whole frieze as a representation of an underwater landscape, where the red-brown areas and the turtles would be placed under water.
56 Doumas 1995: Fig. 36 (left).

of an oval body with many flexed arms attached to the sides of it (mainly visible on the right side of the body). Crabs are not known from Aegean wall paintings[57] (see below). The style of the crab, however, strongly resembles the drawing style of the griffin in the Akrotiri miniature landscape[58] (Fig. 21), which is also only carried out as a black contour drawing, although the other animal representations of the same fresco are filled with colours and internal drawings. Both, the crab from Qatna and the griffin from Thera walk on the surface of the coloured landscape. Thus, this style of animal representation adds another feature of comparison between the Qatna turtle frieze and the Akrotiri landscape frieze. These two paintings have to be seen in a very close connection to each other, both stylistically and chronologically.

The Syrian Elements

The Aegean elements detectable in the wall paintings of Qatna are abundant, however not all motifs and stylistic features are rooted in Aegean art. First of all, the motif of the turtle is, at least as far as the actual evidence is concerned, absent in Minoan, Theran or Mycenaean wall paintings. On the other hand, the turtle is known from Near Eastern iconography, even if is not to be found in wall paintings. It is known to be a symbol of the god Ea (Enki), the god of the fresh-water, in the 3rd and 2nd mill. BC.[59] In this meaning it is depicted on seals[60] and Kassite kudurrus.[61] Therefore, we might see a Mesopotamian origin of the depiction of the turtles at Qatna, especially with their clear association with water on the turtle frieze.

Also the crab, which was part of the turtle frieze, is not derived from Aegean iconography but seems to be a local feature. However, the crab is also not traceable as a religious symbol in Near Eastern iconography.[62] Therefore, its adoption in the water scene of Room N seems to be a spontaneous and innovative idea of the artists at Qatna, comparable to its later integration as a characteristic element of water landscapes in reliefs of the neo-Assyrian period.[63]

Furthermore, the general principles of composition, which include many oblique lines as a specific element, seem to be of local or regional origin. C. von Rüden (2006) could reconstruct a specific structure of composition in a manner that is uncommon in Aegean wall paintings, as it is in Egyptian or Mesopotamian style. Even in Syria these compositional principles are not attested at other places. Obviously, this is another innovative feature of the local craftsmen of Qatna when producing the wall painting in the Royal Palace.

Finally, as A. Brysbaert concluded in her analysis, the technique is not a pure Aegean one. This can be seen in the Aegean string technique, which is only traceable on a few fragments from Qatna while the majority of the parts seem to have been made without this procedure. The same is true for the fresco technique: It is observable on a number of fragments, while others seem to have been made in secco technique. This can most easily be explained by the fact, that the craftsmen started working in the fresco technique but prepared overly large

57 A representation of a crab is known from a Minoan vessel from Knossos dating to the MM III period (Hood 1978: Fig. 12).
58 Doumas 1995: Fig. 32.
59 Black/Green 1992: 179.
60 Boehmer 1965: no. 806 (Akkadian); Thureau-Dangin 1919: 138 (Kassite).
61 Black/Green 1992: Fig. 90, 150.
62 Heimpel 1980-83: 223-224.
63 Hrouda 1991: Fig. on p. 147.

areas with wet plaster, so that the plaster dried before the process of painting was finished. Alternatively, different craftsmen trained in different techniques could have been brought together in the work group responsible for the implementation of the wall painting.

Hypotheses on the Cultural Exchange between Syria and the Aegean

The conclusions which can be drawn from the observation of the undeniable Aegean parallels of the wall paintings of Qatna can be further developed in different directions. Three basic models can be distinguished, all of them acknowledging the influence from the Aegean but interpreting it in a different way. These models will be briefly described and set in contrast with each other.

Hypothesis A: Foreign Craftsmanship Theory

The most spontaneous explanation of the quoted parallels to Minoan frescoes is the assumption that the Qatna paintings were carried out by Aegean artists. This is a plausible theory with regard to our knowledge about international contacts between the cultures of the Mediterranean, Egypt and the Levant during the Middle and Late Bronze Age. The epoch is characterized by an intensive exchange of materials, ideas and technologies.[64] Gift exchange between royalties was a common practice.[65] The exchange of "artists" between courts of different regions must be assumed within this framework, as well.[66]

Wolf-Dietrich and Barbara Niemeier are convinced that the frescoes in the palaces of Alalakh, Tel Kabri and Tell ed-Dabᶜa were carried out by travelling artisans in the framework of diplomatic relations and gift exchange between rulers of the Levant, Egypt and the Mediterranean.[67] A slightly different explanation is offered by Bietak[68] who supports the basic idea that the paintings at Alalakh, Tel Kabri and Tell el-Dabᶜa are to be qualified as "Minoan", but argues for a differentiation of the motifs for adopting Minoan paintings in the Near East. While he does not refuse the possibility of Minoan travelling artisans responsible for the frescoes from Kabri and Alalakh, he proposes a different scenario for Tell ed-Dabᶜa. He is convinced that the Minoan paintings at Tell el-Dabᶜa were accomplished on the occasion of a diplomatic marriage or an important political meeting between members of the Egyptian and Minoan ruling elite. On the other hand, he excludes artisans from the Aegean for the Qatna paintings on the basis of technical, stylistic and chronological differences.[69]

For Qatna the model of foreign travelling craftsmen having carried out the paintings in the Royal Palace seems to be inappropriate due to the many divergences from the usual set of Aegean wall painting techniques, as is evidenced in the non-exclusivity of the fresco and the string impression techniques at Qatna, in the appearance of motifs which are unfamiliar to Aegean artists, such as the turtle or the crab, and in the differences between Qatna and the Aegean with regard to the composition of the drawings. For these reasons, hypothesis A seems to be ruled out in the case of the Qatna wall paintings.

64 Feldman 2007; Caubet 1998.
65 Pfälzner 2007a.
66 Zaccagnini 1983: 245ff.
67 Niemeier 1991; Niemeier/Niemeier 1998: 88-96; 2000: 793.
68 Bietak/Marinatos 1995: 60; Bietak 2007: 288.
69 Bietak 2007: 280-288, 295.

Hypothesis B: Cultural Communication Theory (by Constance von Rüden)[70]

A number of scholars disagree with the hypothesis of travelling artisans, and want to see similarities of motifs and style between the Aegean and the Levant as a result of the circulation of goods and ideas throughout the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East instead.[71] Within the same general framework this hypothesis has to be specified concerning the wall paintings of Qatna, which have to be seen as a general consequence of cultural communication between the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria. Having been produced around 1400 BC (see above the different opinion of the present author of the article), parallels for some iconographic elements and other stylistic similarities with the Aegean are hardly to be dated in the same period, but earlier. It could therefore be argued that some of them might have been transferred to Syria already at a much earlier stage than the phase when the Qatna paintings were made. This transfer could have occurred through different communication levels: Next to communication through direct contacts between parts of the population, it is also possible to assume a transfer through imports of Aegean objects such as pottery and textiles.[72] The fresco technique itself, as a very prominent example of technological transfer, has been brought to Syria from the Aegean already during the Middle Bronze Age, as is observable in the wall paintings of Alalakh VII.[73] Consequently the technology must have already been known and probably available as well to the local craftsmen of Qatna. When the Qatna wall paintings were produced, the Aegean elements had already been included in the material culture of Syria as a kind of a local tradition, even though their foreign character was still obvious and ought to be obtained.

Hypothesis C: Craftsmanship Interaction Theory

Although the Cultural Communication Hypothesis by Constance von Rüden (see above) is very attractive from a principal point of view, the present author is convinced that it does not completely explain the nature of the Qatna wall paintings. Several contradictory arguments can be put forward: As explained above, there is no technical reason to assume that the wall paintings at Qatna could have only existed for maximally 50 years. Due to the sophisticated fastening technique of the plaster and the roofing of the room they could have been in place for a much longer period. Therefore, they could principally have been produced at the same time as their parallels existed in the Aegean. A direct interregional influence is therefore possible, which is all the more compelling as one takes the high degree of comparability of single motifs in the paintings of Qatna and in the Minoan world into account which were demonstrated above. For this reason, another hypothesis is put forward and preferred by the present author, which combines considerations of the first two hypotheses, but aims at finding solutions for the shortcomings of these theories.

Several pieces of evidence can be composed to design a model which can explain the existence of wall paintings of strongly Aegean style at Qatna. On the one side is the employment of the fresco technique – well attested at Qatna – and the string impressions – only noticeable on single pieces – which, nevertheless, clearly hint to an Aegean origin

70 Short summary of what will be elaborated in detail in von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2).
71 Winter 2000: 754-755.; Caubet/Matoian 1995.
72 Von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2).
73 Woolley 1955: 229 (for the use of string impressions and incised pre-drawings).

of the manner of execution of the painted decoration at Qatna. This is paralleled by the appearance of typically Aegean motifs in the Qatna wall paintings, such as palm trees and dolphins, of typically Aegean colour preferences, such as painting plants in the blue colour, and of typically Aegean compositions, such as water scenes with animals and plants. This set of Aegean techniques and motifs was only employed in very few and singular instances in the Near East, such as in the painted decoration of Alalakh Level VII of the MB II period, situated on the north-western edge of the Syrian cultures. Further to the south it is known to have existed only at Tell Kabri in Palestine and, far away, at Tell ed-Dabᶜa in Egypt. Within the central parts of Syria it is – as far as we can conclude from excavation results up to the present – only attested at Qatna. There is, thus, no indication, that this characteristic Aegean technique was fully introduced in Syria and the broader Levant in a way that it would have been included into the technical repertoire of local craftsmanship. It always remained an "exotic technique" and exactly this was the basis of its high esteem by the local elites.[74] The exclusivity of access to this exotic technique was the precondition for its value as a symbol of prestige for the ruling elites. For this reason, the Near Eastern elites must have appreciated the fact that this technique remained a foreign element rather than observing it becoming common and widespread in the broader area of the Levant. This would have resulted in a weakening of what Feldman[75] interprets as the desire of the "Levantine frescoes to call attention purposely to their "Aegeanness"". This might explain the striking rarity of the occurrence of Aegean technical and iconographic features at Near Eastern sites.[76]

If the techniques and motifs were foreign to Syrian craftsmen, their appearance on the wall paintings from Qatna can only be explained by direct influence from and direct contact to the Aegean world. The exchange of a closely related set of elements can only take place through direct action by craftsmen. An indirect learning would result in a dissociation of the single components of the set. Therefore, it is inevitable to assume that Aegean artists[77] or artists trained in the Aegean, which is equivalent and consequently synonymous to each other, participated in the accomplishment of paintings in the Qatna palace.[78]

But this is only one part of the picture presented by the wall paintings of Qatna. On the other hand, we can observe at Qatna, that the wall paintings include non-Aegean elements, such as turtles and crabs, and that they incorporate non-Aegean traits of composition, such as the subdivisions of trapezoid fields. These can neither be seen as typical Syrian elements

74 Feldman 2007.

75 Feldman 2007: 43.

76 Often, the rarity of frescoes in the Near East is seen as a result of bad preservation or as a consequence of the insufficient state of excavations in Near Eastern countries, to which, however, can be objected that fresco paintings theoretically have a much better preservation because of their thick and stable plaster and the durability of the permeated colours when compared to the much more fragile "secco" paintings.

77 The term "Aegean artists" should not be used and understood as an ethnical attribution of the single artist being "a Minoan", but as a common affiliation of craftsmen to an Aegean kind of artistic training.

78 As Brysbaert (2007b) points out, processes regarding the development of techniques and the learning of techniques can be modelled as "cross-craft interactions" (CCI), where different specialisations from different fields are involved and associated with each other.

of iconography and design because they are not attested in the decorative systems at other Syrian sites. Therefore, it seems to be legitimate to qualify them as innovative elements of the local craftsmen employed at Qatna.

How can this apparent contradiction between foreign Aegean and local innovative elements be explained? The model of a mixed workgroup is presented here as a possible explanation. It is based on the assumption that a single artist would not have been able to carry out the task of painting even one of the palace rooms. For purely practical reasons a workgroup needed to be established. For this purpose an "Aegean artist" could have been called to Qatna. This was common practice in Syria and the Near East during the 2nd mill. BC, as it is demonstrated by the demand of a sculptor to be sent from the Kassite king of Babylonia to the Hittite king Hattušili III,[79] or by the request by the king of Ugarit for a sculptor to be sent from the court of Egypt.[80] This practice can be seen in the network of gift exchange by the ruling elites of the 2nd mill. BC.[81] Other members of the workgroup could have been recruited from surrounding Syrian places or from the site itself. One can assume that for practical reasons local craftsmen outnumbered the foreigners within this group.

This situation led to an intensive interaction between local and foreign craftsmen within the workgroup, stimulating and influencing each other and contributing on different levels to the opus.[82] The overall composition of the paintings most probably was conceived by a local artist, while the motifs of the single fields and the border decorations were designed by an "Aegean artist", who also set the rules for the technical execution. The realisation was made jointly whereby the execution only partially followed the given technical rules due to the different background of the single craftsmen. The fresco technique was not consequently applied, while the string impression technique was only sporadically adopted, probably only by the foreign artisan(s).

This workgroup with its specific composition functioned as a "local workshop" for wall paintings at Qatna. It is not known for how long this workshop was active at Qatna before it was dissolved again when the task had been carried out. For the time of its existence it was a "Syrian workshop" by definition, which could have included "Aegean artists". This articulately shows that the often pretended dichotomy of the two principles dissolves at a closer look. It underlines, moreover, the complexity of the principles of cultural interaction.

The model of craftsmanship interaction should be seen as a theory not only applicable in the specific case of Qatna, but it can be argued that it played an important role in the wider context of cultural interactions in the Near East in the 2nd mill. BC. This is based on the attested mobility of people in this period, the close contact and exchange between ruling elites, and the search for exotica as well as the desire for innovation in order to create prestige. Workshops of interactive craftsmanship can be seen as a phenomenon initiated by the ruling elites, who were the patrons ordering this kind of art. It might, as a general theory, better explain the creation of the Aegean-style painted decorations in the Near East than the concept of "travelling artisans",[83] who would move from region to region on their

79 Zaccagnini 1983: 253.
80 Lackenbacher 2002: 239ff.
81 Zaccagnini 1983; Pfälzner 2007a.
82 As Brysbaert (2007b: 344) argues larger workgroups consisting of painters and plasterers are needed to act in close cooperation in order to execute Aegean kind of wall paintings.
83 Niemeier 1991; Niemeier/Niemeier 1998; 2000.

own economic initiative, or the very specific concept of "special bi-lateral relationship" (e.g. between Tell el-Dabᶜa and Knossos), where direct political interest is the agent of an exchange of art style.[84]

Summary

In conclusion, a date of around 1500 BC, or more widely in the 16th to early 15th cent. BC, is proposed for the wall paintings from Room N in the Royal Palace of Qatna. This is opposed to the ideas of C. von Rüden who sees them originating at around 1400 BC,[85] and Manfred Bietak, who even argues for a date within the 14th century.[86] It would place the Qatna paintings, in the row of Aegean-style paintings in the Near East, later than the Alalakh Level VII frescoes, but slightly earlier or at least contemporary to the Tell ed-Dabᶜa paintings. This assumption is based on the very close parallels to the Late Minoan IA painting tradition of the Aegean, in connection with theoretical considerations about the durability of the Qatna painted plaster. The proposed later dates appear to be implausible because one would expect a much stronger divergence from Aegean archetypes and a successive hybridisation of elements, if a longer time gap between the originals in the Aegean and the adoption in Syria would have existed.

For the same reason, a direct involvement of "Aegean artists" in the accomplishment of the Qatna paintings is assumed. These artistic forces must, however, have been associated with local craftsmen, who introduced local ideas and innovative local conceptions into the common work carried out in the framework of a special purpose workshop. This "craftsmanship interaction model" is seen as a concept which might also be applied to the question of how cultural interaction between different artistic traditions was "organised" and achieved during the 2nd mill. BC in the Near East. With this hypothesis, the dichotomy of "Aegean artists" and "Syrian workshops" can be transcended by attesting a "Levantine-Aegean" style of mural paintings.

84 Bietak 2007: 290.
85 C. von Rüden (2006, forthcoming, see footnote 2).
86 Bietak 2007: 272-273, 280, footnote 35.

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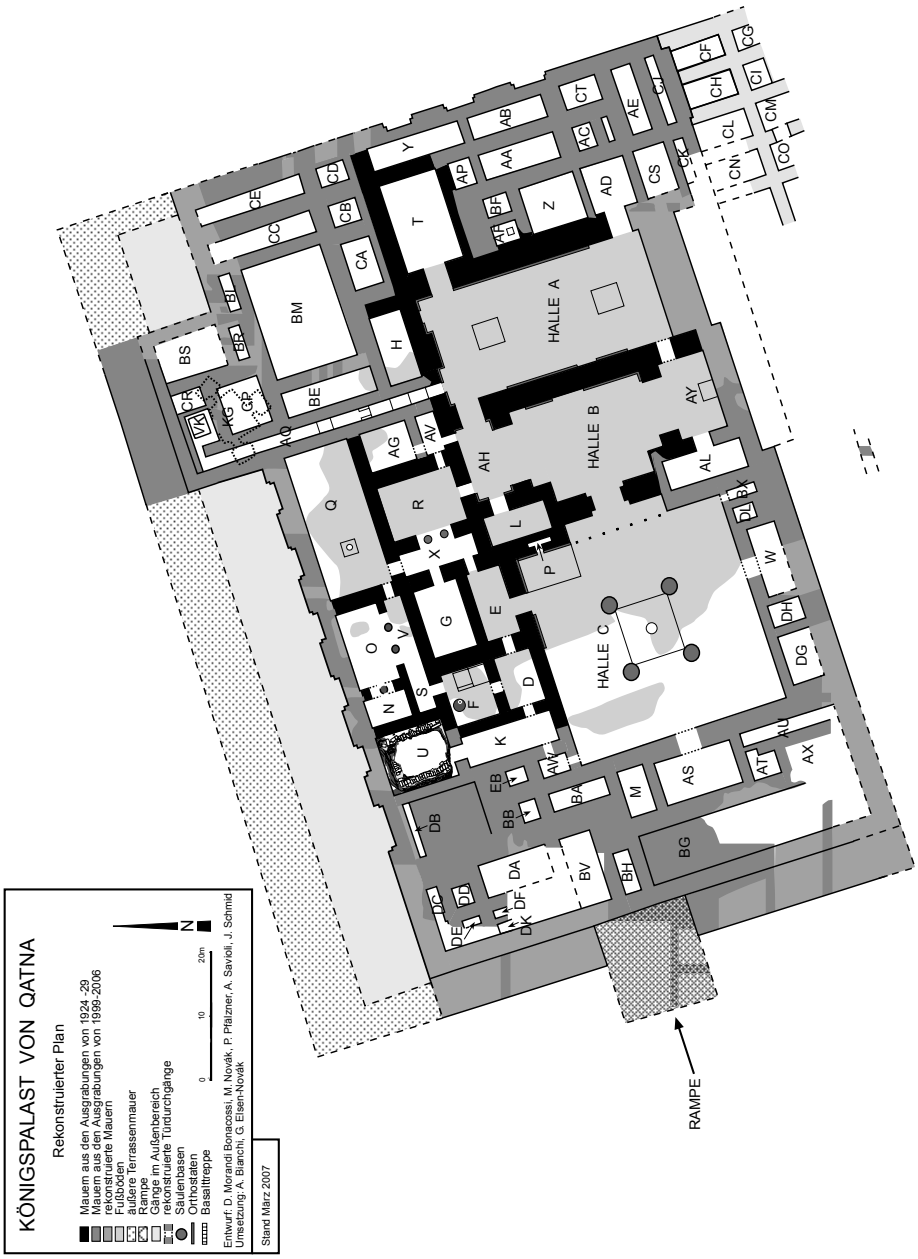

Fig. 1: Reconstructed Plan of the Royal Palace of Qatna

Fig. 2: Backside of the painted plaster fragments with lime fingers for attachment

Fig. 3: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: red boundary bands with black contour lines (MSH01G - i 0135)

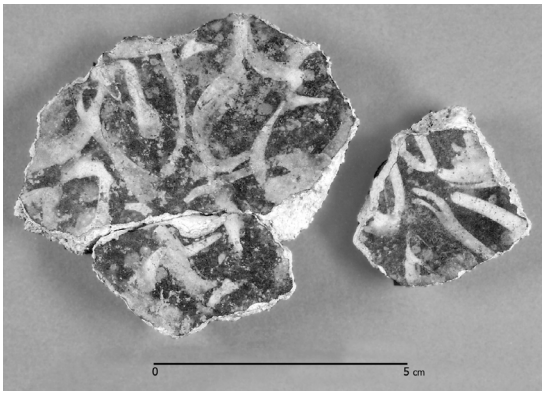

Fig. 4: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: black field with irregular painting, probably floral motives (MSH00 G - i 0151)

Fig. 5: Knossos (Crete), floral decorations from the MM II-III period
Source: Evans 1967: Pl. VIII.3

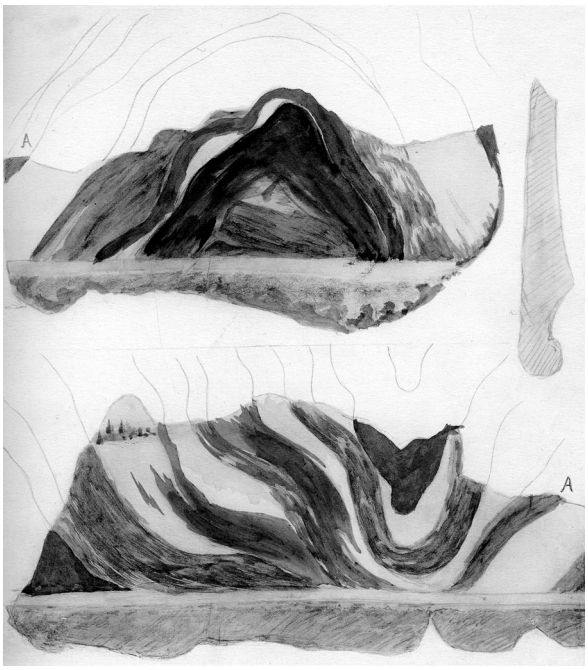

Fig. 6: Qatna, wall paintings from area east of Room X of the Royal Palace: stone imitation
Source: Du Mesnil du Buisson 1935: frontispice

Fig. 7: Akrotiri (Thera): Marble imitations from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 55

Fig. 8: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: foliate band, black on white version

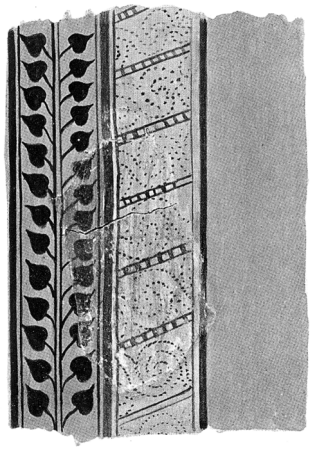

Fig. 9: Knossos (Crete): foliate band, black on white
Source: Evans 1967: Pl. E.1

Fig. 10: Mycenae (Greece): gold cup with foliate band decoration from the LH I period
Source: Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Fig. 216

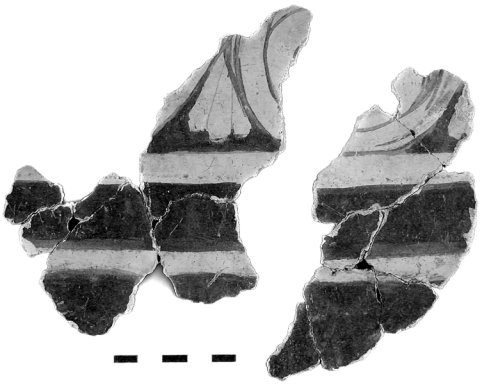

Fig. 11: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: running spirals

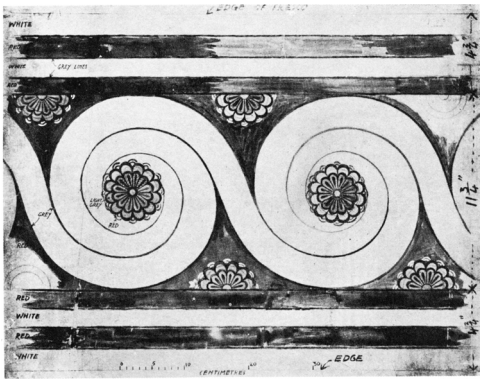

Fig. 12: Knossos (Crete): running spiral decoration in the palace
Source: Evans 1964: Vol. III, p. 383

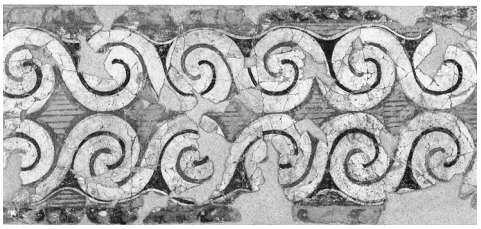

Fig. 13: Akrotiri (Thera): double frieze of running spirals from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 94

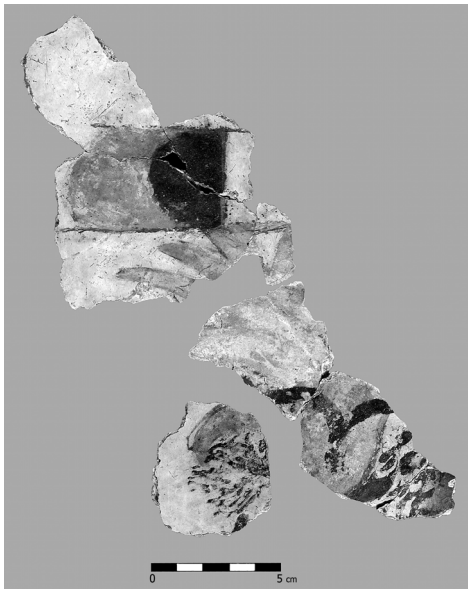

Fig. 14: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: three fragments from upper end of a palm tree with blue leaves (MSH01 G - i 0215 and MSH01 G - i 0215)

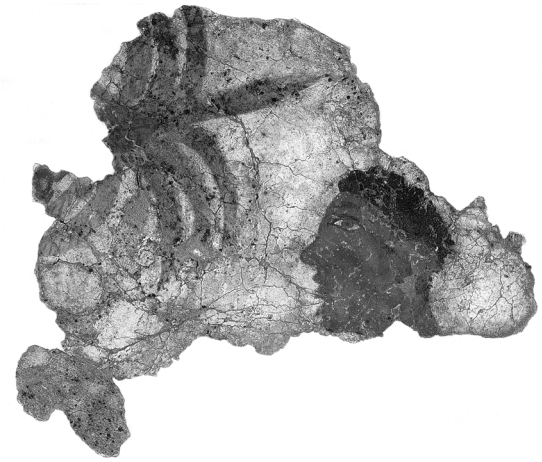

Fig. 15: Akrotiri (Thera): Palm tree with blue leaves from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 148

Fig. 16: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: rocks and grass in grey and red (MSH01G - i 0196)

Fig. 17: Knossos (Crete): rocks and flowers, detail of the "safran-gatherer" fresco, from MM II-III period
Source: Evans 1967: Pl. I

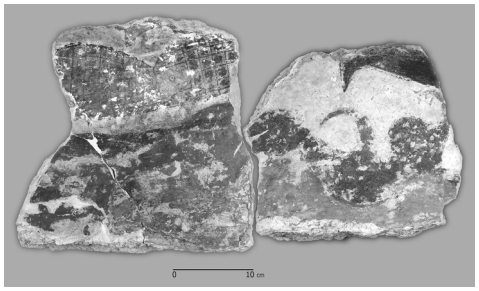

Fig. 19: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: Water landscape with turtles (MSH00G - i 0091 + 92 + 110, montiert)

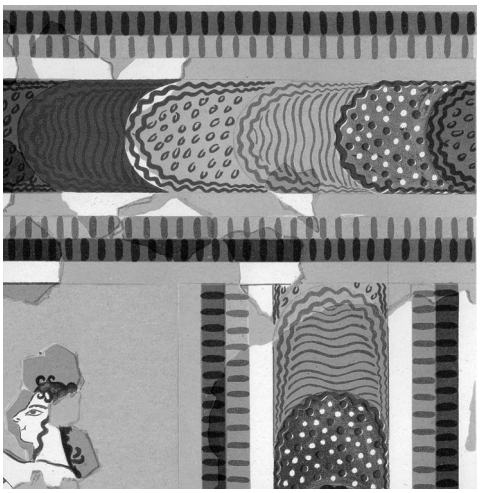

Fig. 18: Knossos (Crete): border of overlapping ovals, detail of the bull-leaper fresco from the LM I period
Source: Marinatos/Hirmer 1973: Pl. XVII

Fig. 20: Akrotiri (Thera): miniature landscape fresco showing palm trees with blue leaves, from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 31

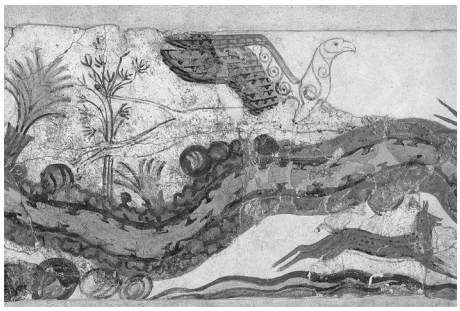

Fig. 21: Akrotiri (Thera): miniature landscape fresco showing griffin in contour painting besides a river, from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 32

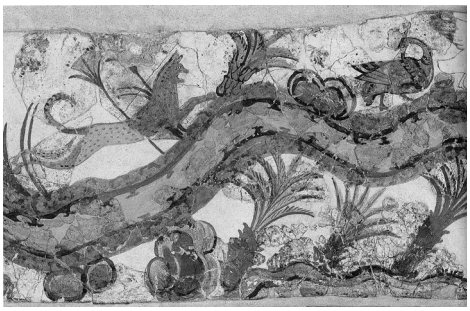

Fig. 22: Akrotiri (Thera): miniature landscape fresco showing animals and plants along a river, from the LM IA period
Source: Doumas 1995: Fig. 33

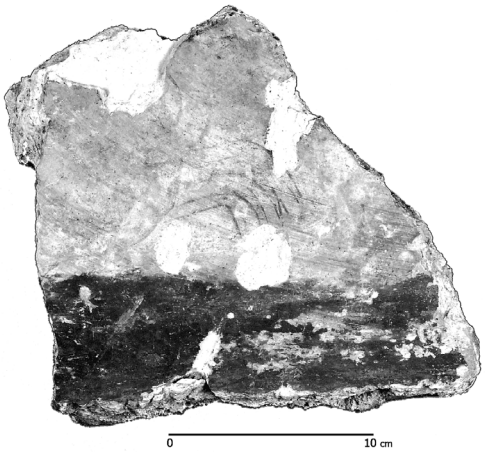

Fig. 23: Qatna, wall paintings from Room N of the Royal Palace: crab in connection with a water landscape (MSH00G - i 0108)