

THE MONKEY FRIEZE FROM XESTE 3, ROOM 4: RECONSTRUCTION AND INTERPRETATION

Aegean wall-paintings are a rich source of information for reconstructing society in Bronze Age Greece. The continuing excavations at Akrotiri on Thera since 1967 have vastly expanded the amount of fresco material available for consideration, and the lavish illustrations in a recent book by C. Doumas have made many new compositions accessible.¹ One large freestanding building, Xeste 3, has attracted much scholarly attention because of its complex pictorial program, but most analyses to date have concentrated on the scenes with human figures.² This paper focuses instead on the blue monkeys (*cercopithecus aethiops aethiops*) which formed part of the decorative scheme on the walls of ground floor room 4. In honor of Malcolm Wiener's many contributions to the archaeology of prehistoric Greece, I would like to attempt here to reassemble the pieces of a Theran "monkey puzzle" for his delectation.

The fragments of the frieze from room 4 published thus far include rockwork, the figures of several monkeys, flying swallows, and baby swallows in a nest, all set in characteristic Theran fashion against a white rather than a colored background.³ Doumas has suggested that this frieze was positioned at the top of the wall, a location analogous to that of the Miniature Fresco from the West House.

One group of fragments (Pl. CXLVIIIa) includes the head of a monkey at left, shown in profile to the right. This monkey cradles a small yellow lyre with four visible strings and curved finials at the top (one finial projects behind the overlapping neck of the monkey). The outer edge of the finial is outlined by a row of small dots. Because part of another finial is visible at a slightly lower level, we must reconstruct a second monkey musician which has not been noted in earlier discussions.

To the right of these entertainers, other fragments show a third monkey, also depicted in profile to the right. The nape of its neck survives, along with a non-joining group of plaster fragments that represent the top of the head and muzzle, along with the left arm (the paw is missing). At the base of the monkey's neck a yellow loop is visible, bisected by a yellow line. This yellow loop is identical in shape to the red loop which represents the string of a necklace of blue-gray (rock crystal or amethyst?) beads carried by a young woman, the "Necklace Swinger" painted on the wall of a lustral basin in a neighboring room of Xeste 3 (Pl. CLa).⁴ Thus, the yellow loop at the monkey's nape suggests that the animal may be wearing a necklace, like many of the female figures in other frescoes from the building. In addition, the monkey appears to be wearing a gold hoop earring, outlined with small dots, though until the figure is completely restored this detail remains uncertain. Most of the women in Xeste 3 wear gold earrings, but the male figures depicted there lack personal ornaments.⁵

Our monkey brandishes an object outlined in black which tapers to the left; from its pointed tip hangs a curved yellow plume.⁶ At the opposite end are sinuous black bands which loop to the right and left, covered with white spots. When first examined, this black band was

- 1 C. DOUMAS, *The Wall-Paintings of Thera* (1992). See also ID. (ed.), *Ακρωτήρι Θήρας. Είκοσι χρόνια έρευνας (1967-1987)* (1992).
- 2 E.g., N. MARINATOS, *Art and Religion in Thera. Reconstructing a Bronze Age Society* (1984) 61-84; ID., *Minoan Religion* (1993) 203-211. A new interpretation has been presented in preliminary form by P. REHAK and R.R. SNIHUROWYCH, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture? Medicine, Myth and Matriarchy in the Thera Frescoes," in *American Philological Association Abstracts of Papers Presented at the One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting* (1997) 180.
- 3 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) 128, Pls 95-99; E. DAVIS, "The Cycladic Style of the Thera Frescoes," in *TAW III.1* (1990) 214 ff. Though the style is Theran, much of the iconography seems Minoan.
- 4 For best detail, see DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pl. 104.
- 5 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pls 109-15.
- 6 Cf. the similar plumes on an unrestored fresco from Xeste 4: DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pl. 139.

misidentified as a spotted snake, but the combination of elements is now correctly recognized as a tapering sword sheath with a looped, dotted baldric at the base and a yellow (gold foil?) tassel at the tip. Originally, the monkey must have been grasping the sheath where the baldric was attached. The evenly spaced white dots on the baldric might represent metal sequins or beads, similar to the gold beads that decorated a baldric in tholos tomb II at Routsis near Pylos.⁷ Such sword baldrics seem to have been worn diagonally over one shoulder and under the opposite arm, rather than belted around the waist.⁸

A second group of fresco fragments from room 4 in Xeste 3 includes blue and red colored rockwork with several clumps of blooming crocus plants. The purple flower petals have faded and are now difficult to see. Two additional monkeys are represented (Pl. CXLVIIIb). Near the lower left corner of the scene is the raised forearm and right paw of one monkey, who brandishes a yellow sword which tapers toward the right. Similar tapering yellow swords are held by women on a painted plaque and in a wall fresco, both of LH III date, from the Cult Center at Mycenae.⁹ The heel of the blade in the Akrotiri painting is painted black to represent a flaring hilt-guard. The angle of the paw with the sword makes it impossible for a single monkey to be brandishing both sword and sheath as claimed:¹⁰ these implements must belong to different animals.

To the right of the sword's tip is the body of another monkey, this one shown in profile to the left. Despite damage to the head, enough survives of the body to suggest that the monkey is crouching with one or both knees raised and both arms extended in front of the body, though once again, the paws are not preserved. Along the stomach and between the shoulders, the artist has used reserved white areas to suggest the pale fur covering the belly of the animal. Another monkey, apparently crouching in a similar manner, occurs on a worn gold cult ring found in a tomb at Kalyvia on Crete.¹¹

These observations make it possible to suggest a preliminary reconstruction for the two monkey scenes in room 4 as parts of a composition which includes five animals. On the left are the two musicians and the monkey brandishing the sheath, while to the right are one monkey brandishing the sword and another crouching behind it (Pl. CXLIX).

Despite the remaining lacunae, this attempt at reconstruction adds important new evidence to our knowledge of Aegean painting and iconography. Frescoes with blue monkeys are now well attested on Crete and the Minoanized islands of Thera and Melos.¹² A composition from the upper floor of Xeste 3 includes another monkey in the act of presenting saffron stigmas to an enthroned goddess, indicating that the creatures played a significant role in the decorative program of the building.¹³ The so-called "Blue Boy" composition from the Knossos palace illustrates a related activity, with two monkeys (not

7 S. MARINATOS, "Excavations Near Pylos, 1956," *Antiquity* 31 (1957) 97-100, esp. 99: "By the left hand lay a dagger inlaid with alternate gold and silver nautili on a niello background and with marine decoration in the same materials. A little beyond it lay thirteen gold beads, in shape and size like shells. There can be little doubt that they were from the belt which held the dagger."

8 CMS I no. 11.

9 The painted plaque and a wall fresco, both from the Cult Center at Mycenae. For discussion of these representations, see P. REHAK, "New Observations on the Mycenaean 'Warrior Goddess,'" *AA* (1984) 535-545; ID., "Tradition and Innovation in the Fresco from Room 31 in the 'Cult Center' at Mycenae," in *Eikon* 39-62; S. IMMERWAHR, *Aegean Painting in the Bronze Age* (1990) 191-92 My no. 7, 191 My no. 6; P. REHAK, "The Mycenaean 'Warrior Goddess' Revisited," in *POLEMOS. Le contexte guerrier en Égée à l'Âge du Bronze. Actes de la 7^e Rencontre égéenne internationale (Liège, 14-17 avril 1998)*, *Aegaeum* 19 (1999) 227-239.

10 Pace DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) 128.

11 CMS II.3 no. 103.

12 For a fragmentary monkey from Melos, see L. MORGAN, "Island Iconography: Thera, Kea, Milos," in *TAW* III.1 (1990) 252-266, esp. 256 Fig. 7.

13 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pl. 122; N. MARINATOS, "An Offering of Saffron to the Minoan Goddess of Nature: The Role of the Monkey and the Importance of Saffron," in *Gifts to the Gods. Proceedings of the Uppsala Symposium 1985* (*Boreas* 15, 1987) 123-132.

boys) gathering crocuses and putting the blossoms in baskets.¹⁴ These animals wear red harnesses, perhaps to indicate that they are being kept as pets. From the House of the Frescoes west of the Knossos palace comes a landscape scene that includes monkeys, birds and their nests, and crocuses as well as other flowers and vegetation.¹⁵ Here, one monkey eats a stolen egg. A fresco from Area Alpha at Akrotiri includes at least two monkeys at a shrine, underscoring the ritual or religious nature of some scenes in which the animals occur.¹⁶ The walls of room Beta 6 at Akrotiri present us with eight more monkeys, although these animals are simply cavorting among the rocks, without any obvious ritual significance.¹⁷ The Xeste 3 painting, however, adds a completely new dimension by showing us that Aegean artists could conceive of monkeys performing or mimicking complex human activities.

The exceptional preservation of Xeste 3 also allows us to hypothesize about the meaning of the ground floor monkey fresco in relation to the pictorial program of the rest of the building. Room 4 is the first ground floor room that visitors to Xeste 3 would enter after leaving the entrance vestibule. The rocky landscape in which the monkeys appear is very similar to those painted on the walls of both the ground floor lustral basin in room 3 and a corresponding room on the upper floor, where young girls harvest crocus blossoms for an enthroned goddess, a scene mentioned above because it too includes a blue monkey as well as a leashed griffin.¹⁸ Since the monkeys are exotic and on some level supernatural, the frieze in room 4 creates a liminal, transitional space which would have helped prepare visitors for the other painted scenes.

The exotic aspects of the monkeys are enhanced by the fact that they were not native to the Aegean, but were imported from Egypt, probably through a complex exchange network.¹⁹ In Egypt, monkeys are often represented as pets or even musicians (Pl. CLb),²⁰ but they also had a connection with female sexuality, appearing for example as the decoration of women's cosmetic containers.²¹ Since women of all ages feature prominently in the decoration of Xeste 3, the inhabitants of the Aegean may have recognized the Egyptian associations of monkeys and women. At the same time, P. Parker has noted that the anatomy of the Thera monkeys has been anthropomorphized to make them look more human.²²

- 14 PM I 265-266, Pl. IV; J. PENDLEBURY, *The Archaeology of Crete* (1939) 131, Pl. XXV; S. HOOD, *The Arts in Prehistoric Greece* (1978) 48-49, 49 Figs 27, 28; N. PLATON, "Ο κροκοσυλλέκτης πίθηκος," *KretChron* 1 (1947) 505-524; IMMERWAHR (*supra* n. 9) 170 Kn no. 1. For a reconstruction of the room with its frieze, see MARINATOS (*supra* n. 2, 1993) 62 Fig. 53.
- 15 PM II.2 443-466, Pls X, XI; M.A.S. CAMERON, "Unpublished Paintings from the 'House of the Frescoes' at Knossos," *BSA* 63 (1968) 1-31; HOOD (*supra* n. 14) 51-52, 51 Figs 31-33; IMMERWAHR (*supra* n. 9) 170 Kn no. 2; MARINATOS (*supra* n. 2, 1993) 194 Fig. 200.
- 16 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pl. 147. One monkey, apparently crouching, is shown to the left of a column supporting an entablature with horns of consecration; the tail of a second monkey is visible to the right of the column: N. MARINATOS, "The Monkey in the Shrine: A Fresco Fragment from Thera," in *ΕΙΛΑΠΙΝΗ. τόμος τιμητικός για τον καθηγητή Νικόλαο Πλάτωνα* (1987) 417-421. Cf. the girls garlanding shrines on an ivory pyxis from Ayia Triada: F. HALBHERR, E. STEFANI, and L. BANTI, "Haghia Triada nel periodo tardo palaziale," *ASAtene* 39 (1977) [1980] 97-98, 97 Figs 64, 65.
- 17 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pls 85-89.
- 18 Cf. also the landscape on the Zakros Sanctuary Rhyton which includes rockwork, a peak sanctuary, and a clump of blooming crocus: N. PLATON, *Zakros. The Discovery of a Lost Palace of Ancient Crete* (1971) 167 Fig. (upper right).
- 19 See recently T. STRASSER, "The Blue Monkeys of the Aegean and Their Implications for Bronze Age Trade," *AJA* 101 (1997) 348 (abstract); P. PARKER, "African Vervets on Crete and Thera during MM IIIB-LM IA," *AJA* 101 (1997) 348 (abstract). Strasser and Parker are currently preparing a joint article on this subject.
- 20 H.G. FISCHER, "A Scribe of the Army in a Saqqara Mastaba of the Early Fifth Dynasty," *JNES* 18.4 (1959) 252 n. 52, Pl. Xb: Metropolitan Museum of Art no. 10.130.2607. H. 5.6 cm, L. 5 cm, Th. 2.2 cm. Date: Middle Kingdom?
- 21 J. BOURRIAU, *Pharaohs and Mortals. Egyptian Art in the Middle Kingdom* (1988) 142 no. 144 and Figs 144a-b; E. TERRACE, "'Blue Marble' Plastic Vessels and Other Figures," *JARCE* 5 (1966) 59-60; L. MANNICHE, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (1987) 43-44; H.G. FISCHER, "Another Pithemorphic Vessel of the Sixth Dynasty," *JARCE* 30 (1993) 1-9; FISCHER (*supra* n. 20) 233-72.
- 22 PARKER (*supra* n. 19). I am grateful to the author for allowing me to read her unpublished MA thesis, *Monkeys and Their Role in the Aegean Bronze Age, MM III-LM I* (Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1996).

The presence of both sword and sheath in the Thera fresco helps clarify our understanding of these objects when they are paired in other Aegean representations. A youth on the Chieftain Cup from a LM IB context at Ayia Triada holds a sword in his right hand and a plumed sheath in his left (Pl. CLc).²³ A matronly woman on a cushion seal from a LM IA context at Knossos, contemporary with the Thera fresco, likewise holds a plumed sheath in one hand and a sword in the other (Pl. CLd).²⁴ Prior to the discovery of the Thera painting, the plumed sheath represented in the Minoan works was misunderstood as a whip or ritual sprinkler.²⁵ The careful attention to the rendering of the hilt in the Thera painting and the Knossos sealstone suggests that these swords are elaborately ornamented weapons like the Shaft Grave swords (LH I) or the regalia from the palace at Mallia (MM II).

Swords and sheaths are objects that we associate primarily with men or male spheres of activity, as on the Chieftain Cup and in combat scenes on seals and rings.²⁶ The discovery of swords among the dedications in the Arkalochori Cave on Crete, however, implies that they may have a religious or ritual aspect as well.²⁷ The Knossos sealstone, moreover, shows that women also handled these implements, and the woman on the seal has a prominent breast, a garment tied over one shoulder, and wears her hair in a snood like the mature women represented on the wall of an upper floor room in Xeste 3.²⁸ The fact that women and monkeys handle swords and sheaths, as well as men, suggests that the identification of these implements on the Chieftain Cup as elements of gift exchange specific to a male homosexual courting ritual is too restrictive.²⁹ In Mycenaean times, swords are a distinctive attribute of the mainland 'Warrior Goddess', whose genesis may be traceable to Neopalatial Crete.³⁰ Aegean swords can thus be considered implements with a wide range of potential meanings.³¹

Finally, the presence of monkey musicians adds to our incomplete knowledge of Aegean music and its relationship to the sphere of ritual activity.³² The lyre-playing monkeys on Thera also recall the presence of animal musicians elsewhere in the ancient world, as for example on the soundbox of a harp from the "royal tombs" at Ur, nearly a millennium earlier,³³ and in Egypt.

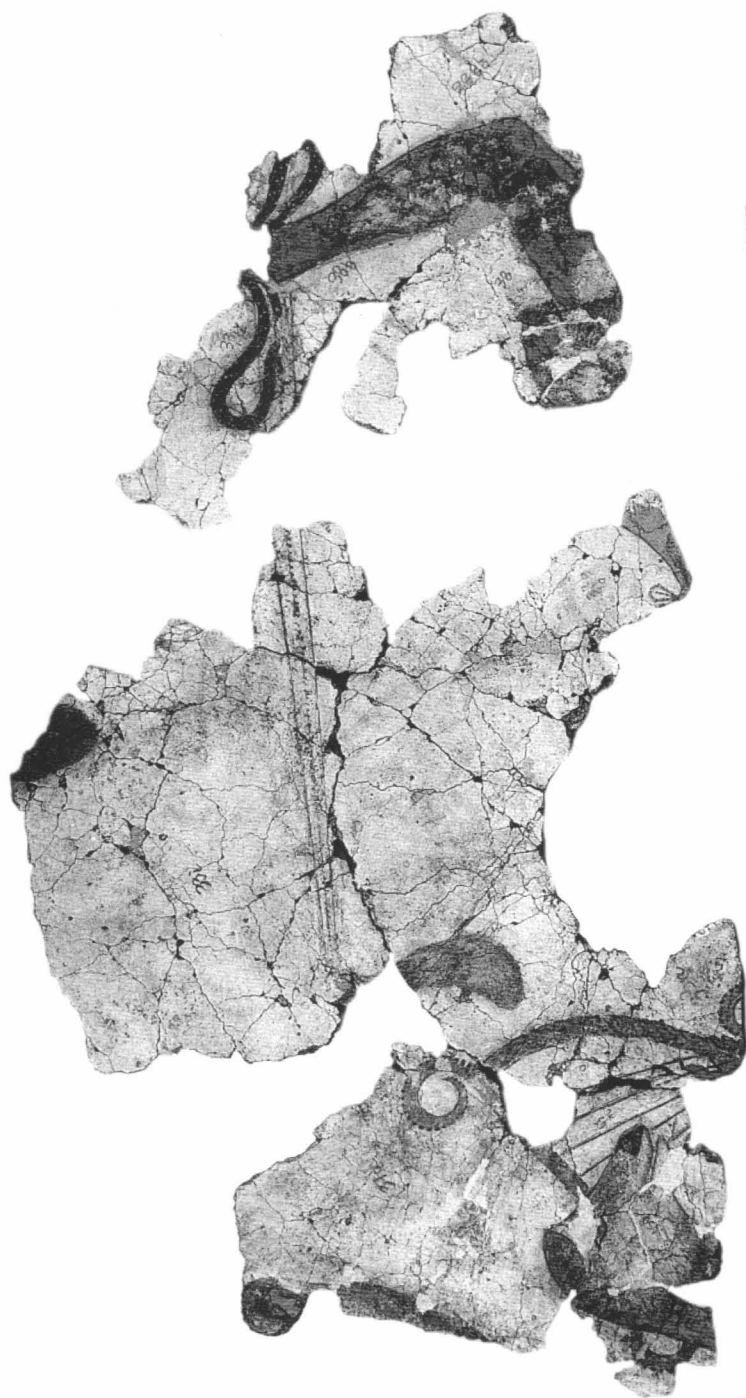
While new additions to the frieze from room 4 in Xeste 3 may require a reassessment of the reconstruction proposed here, the fragments already available for study reinforce the notion that Xeste 3 served an unusually important role in the life of the prehistoric town of Akrotiri, and suggest a new dimension of the Minoan/Cycladic belief system.

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- 23 S. MARINATOS and M. HIRMER, *Crete and Mycenae* (1966) Pls 100, 102 (left); HOOD (*supra* n. 14) 143, 145, 144 Fig. 137.
- 24 CMS II.3 no. 16.
- 25 PM II.2 792, 793-94.
- 26 E.g., CMS I nos. 9, 11, 12, 16. On a seal found at Kakovatos, a man with a sword fights a lion; behind him stands a genius, another religious figure: CMS XI no. 208. The genius extends its forepaws around the scabbard in a gesture which looks protective.
- 27 N.K. SANDARS, "The Earliest Aegean Swords and Their Ancestry," *AJA* 65 (1961) 17-29.
- 28 DOUMAS (*supra* n. 1) Pls 131-34.
- 29 Pace R. KOEHL, "The Chieftain Cup and a Minoan Rite of Passage," *JHS* 106 (1986) 99-110.
- 30 REHAK (*supra* n. 9).
- 31 I. KILIAN-DIRLMEIER, "Remarks on the Non-military Functions of Swords in the Mycenaean Argolid," in R. HÄGG and G.C. NORDQUIST (eds), *Celebrations of Death and Divinity in the Bronze Age Argolid* (1990) 157-61.
- 32 J.G. YOUNGER, *Music in the Aegean Bronze Age* (SIMA-PB 144, 1998) 144. See Pl. 15 for his drawing of my reconstruction presented here.
- 33 C.L. WOOLLEY, *Ur Excavations II. The Royal Cemetery* (1934) 280, Pl. 105; WOOLLEY, *Excavations at Ur. A Record of Twelve Year's Work* (1954) 73-74, Pl. 11. For recent illustration, see R.G. TANSEY and F.S. KLEINER, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (10th ed., 1996) 48 Fig. 2-10.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Pl. CXLVIIIa Photo of room 4 frieze (after DOUMAS Pl. 95).
Pl. CXLVIIIb Photo of room 4 frieze (after DOUMAS Pl. 96).
Pl. CXLIX Reconstruction drawing (author).
Pl. CLa Detail of the "Necklace Swinger's" necklace (author, after DOUMAS Pl. 104).
Pl. CLb Egyptian monkey figurine (author, after FISCHER, *supra* n. 20).
Pl. CLc Ayia Triada Chieftain Cup (after *PM*).
Pl. CLd Knossos cushion seal (author, after *CMS* II 2 no. 11).



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