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A Touch of Luxury from the Western Fringe of the Ancient World: The Aegean Impact on the Qatna Wall Paintings

Constance von Rügen

The discovery of the wall paintings at the palace of Qatna in 2000¹ was one of the first major surprises over the course of the site's modern excavations. At the first glance at the moment of their discovery, the paintings seemed out of place in Syria; they more closely resembled frescos from the Aegean. The present paper² aims not only to present the reconstruction drawings and their technical, iconographic, and conceptual aspects, but also to contribute to a better understanding of the underlying trans-Mediterranean communication processes necessary for their appearance in western Syria. Their incorporation into the Syrian material culture and the question of the local perception of this at first outlandish looking decor presented a particular challenge for this work.

The majority of the paintings were found in the vicinity of Room N in the north-western part of the palace (see C. Schmidt this volume, figure 2). Between Room N and the adjacent Well U, the masonry was preserved in a collapsed state. The western wall of Room N collapsed into the neighbouring, but lower lying, Well U, and the fragmented flooring slid in afterwards (figure 1). Between 2000 and 2004, more than 3000 fragments of wall paintings were recovered from this context. Ceramics associated with this find have been dated to the destruction horizon of the palace, at the end of the Late Bronze Age I. Traces of soot on at least two of the scenes from the western wall make it likely that the paintings were still *in situ* on the wall at the time of a fire, i.e. assumable the final destruction (Plate 1a, reconstruction of the western wall of Room N).³

The fragments from Room N are comprised of five technologically different types that can be further divided on an iconographic level into different subgroups. These differentiations led to a reconstruction of several sections that could be partially allocated to the western and southern walls of Room N.

Based on the distribution of the finds, the left section of the western wall (inner width: ca. 7 m) was presumably painted with a band of two counter-facing running spirals with trefoils filling the crevices, situated in a trapezoidal picture field (Plate 1a, first panel). The spiral band was terminated at the top by a light red area with a transverse motif band composed of arched lines, and was terminated at the bottom with red and white stripes.

Likewise, the panel located to the right was also trapezoidal in shape, with a diagonally placed black leaf band in its centre (Plate 1a, second panel). It was placed to the left of a translucent light red area, and to the right of, and below, wide bands composed of different red tones alternating with thinner white stripes. Also located below this arrangement was a series of red and white bands, and underneath this a black surface with white speckles, which can be interpreted as a pictorial representation of basalt orthostats.

The same black surface also runs to the right underneath an adjoining section containing two miniature landscapes (Plate 1a, third and fourth panel), and leads to the speculation that a continual dado zone ran underneath the reconstructed pictorial fields. Fragments with a reddish colour and white speckles point to the existence of a comparable motif that possibly fulfilled a similar function in another part of Room N. The miniature landscapes with palm trees and rock formations were also placed in two trapezoid frames. Underneath each panel runs a zone of red and white stripes. Addi-



Figure 1: Fragmented flooring of Room N collapsed in Well U (photo: Günther Mirsch; Qatna Project, University of Tübingen).

1 I would like to thank Peter Pfälzner that he gave me the possibility to study the wall paintings from Qatna within the framework of my PhD-thesis.

2 The here published 2009 conference-paper has been submitted 2010 for the publication at hand. It is based upon my PhD-thesis submitted at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg in 2006, slightly changed and shorted published in 2011, see therefore von Rügen 2011.

3 For illustrations in colour, see von Rügen 2011: pl. 69, for a more detailed view on the fire traces, see *ibid.*: pl. 66.

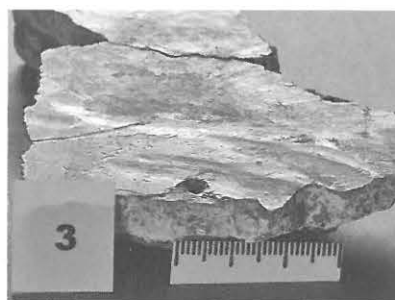
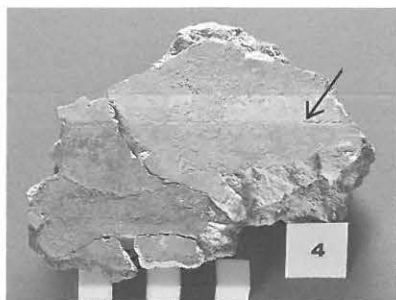
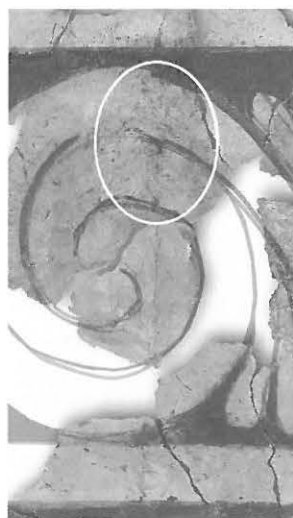


Figure 3: String-impression as guidance for a white band (photo: Günther Mirsch; Qatna Project, University of Tübingen).

Figure 4: Burnishing along the palm leaves (photo: Günther Mirsch; Qatna Project, University of Tübingen).

Figure 2: Falsely sketched preparatory drawing in the upper part of a spiral (photo: Günther Mirsch; Qatna Project, University of Tübingen).

tionally, under the left panel there is a band with a double running spiral on a red background. For this reason the left-hand landscape sits somewhat higher than the right-hand one and the whole conceptual design is stepped. Streaks of fire damage run diagonally across the two miniature landscapes, which, under these circumstances, can be tied to the destruction of the palace during the mid-14th century BC.

Likewise, a very small and heavily burned section with a depiction of a papyrus plant also belonged to the western wall (Plate 1a, fifth panel), and can eventually be placed further to the right in continuation of the burn marks.

The find distribution of another group of fragments in line with the southern wall of Room N makes it likely that their original position was on this wall. Fifteen relatively big fragments could be pieced together as part of the lower edge of a seascape that originally filled the whole of the southern wall (inner width: ca. 4 m) (Plate 1b, reconstruction of the southern wall of Room N).⁴ In the left-hand section, two turtles make their way along a slightly inclining foreground that shortly thereafter transforms into hornlike stylizations, which can be interpreted as cliffs, corals or some sort of vegetation. On the right-hand section of the wall are another turtle, a roughly sketched crab, as well as the black outline of a fish, swimming to the left, that is surrounded on three sides by the red coloured background. Furthermore, a dolphin could be reconstructed on the basis of a few fragments (Plate 2, dolphin-reconstruction of the southern wall of Room N)⁵, which also belonged to the seascape. Like the fish, it was completely surrounded by a red background.

Some technical aspects of the wall paintings from Qatna speak for their execution *al fresco*, hence on damp plaster, an interpretation that is also sup-

ported by analyses carried out by Ann Brysbaert.⁶ A falsely sketched preparatory drawing for instance was smeared with the still damp plaster in order to make it, for the most part, unrecognizable. The still observable traces imply a previous colour application in fresco (figure 2). A few fragments also show string-impressions, a technique used for the initial orientation of the painting that only makes sense in the case of a fresco painting (figure 3).⁷ Moreover, the most plausible explanation for the depressions created by the final burnishing is that the subsurface was still damp at that time (figure 4). Thus, the wall paintings at Qatna were carried out in a complex technique, with main features possibly originating from the Aegean⁸ that seem to appear for the first time in Syria in the wall paintings from Alalakh VII.⁹

Nonetheless, the search for parallels turned out to be problematic. There is not really anything similar to the overall concept of the wall paintings in Room N and their arrangement in trapezoid panels above a black dado zone – a comparison can be made rather with individual motifs, stylistic peculiarities, few conceptual arrangements and the production sequence of Aegean paintings.

Among others, the use of a band of two counter-facing running spirals with floral fillings in the crevices,¹⁰ a band with drop shaped leaves,¹¹ palm trees with blue

6 Brysbaert 2011.

7 See also to this subject: Brysbaert 2008: 113.

8 Ibid.: 4.

9 Woolley 1955: 228-235.

10 Parallels: examples of wall painting: friezes of two counter-facing running spirals: Knossos: Evans 1921: 369-372, figs. 269-270, 272; with simple filling motifs: Cyclades: Doumas 1996: 128, figs. 93, 94; with floral motifs filling the crevices: Evans 1930: 295, fig. 193; complex versions of spiral bands with floral filling motifs of the Mycenaean period: Mycenae: Lamb 1921-1923: 169-170, pl. XXIX; Tiryns: Rodenwaldt 1912: 47-52, pl. VI: 2, VII; Orchomenos: Bulle 1907: 83, pl. XXX: 3-5; Argos: Vollgraff 1904: 369, fig. 1; example of pottery: Benzi 1992: 385, Grab 78, fig. 105a, 165b.

11 Parallels: examples of wall painting: Phaistos: Pernier 1935:

4 For illustrations in colour, see von Rüdén 2011: pl. 12, 13, 68.

5 For illustrations in colour, see von Rüdén 2011: pl. 14.

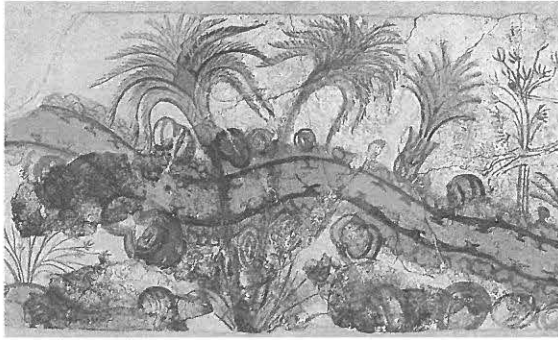


Figure 5: Detail of the *Miniaturfresco* (Doumas 1996: figs. 30-34).

fronds,¹² the undulating outlines of rockwork¹³ (see Plate 1a) as well as the representation of a dolphin¹⁴ or seascape embracing the motifs from several sides¹⁵ (see Plate 1b and 2) are all iconographical elements leading back to the manner of depiction in the Aegean. Similarly, the conduction *al fresco* and some of its



Figure 6: Amphora from Kakovatos (Kalogeropoulos 1998: 130, Kakovatos 14, pl. 39c/d).

- pl. XL: 5; Thebes: Reusch 1956: pl. 18, fragment no. 26; depictions of plants with drop shaped leaves: Tell Kabri: Niemeier – Niemeier 2002: 267, pl. XXXII; Rhodes: Monaco 1941: pl. XI; Morgan 2005: pl. 6b; examples of pottery: Levi 1976: Vol. I, 1, 204d, Vol. I, 2, pl. LXXXIII: c; Marinatos 1973: pl. 50, centre right; 1972: pl. 74b; 1968: pl. 31: 2; 1970: pl. 80c; Mylonas 1973: 40 Cat.-No. B-14, pl. 27a-b; Evans 1914: 47, 49, fig. 64; Niemeier 1985: Cat.-No. VII A 1, pl. 6; Evans 1921: 347-350, fig. 291; Niemeier 1985: Cat.-No. XVI A 1, pl. 7, Cat.-No. II A 6, pl. 5; Popham 1970: pl. 50: 8; Niemeier 1985: Cat.-No. VII B 11, pl. 15; Evans 1906: fig. 143; Mountjoy 1986: fig. 15: 6; 1984: pl. 16f, 18a (both Phylakopi), pl. 22a (Asine).
- 12 Parallels: examples of wall painting: Thera: Doumas 1996: West-House, Room 5, east-wall, 64-67, figs. 30-34 and 187, fig. 148; Knossos: Evans 1930: 294, 339, figs. 225, 343; 1935: 2, 905-913, figs. 884-886, pl. XXXII; Cameron 1970: 163; Thebes: Reusch 1958: 334-358; Mirié 1979: 47-49 and 72-74, pl. 29: 1; Knossos: Evans 1967: pl. IV: 8; Pylos: Lang 1969: 11 N nws, pl. 73, H; Mycenae: Kritseli-Providi 1982: pl. I.
- 13 Parallels: examples of wall painting: Evans 1928: 2, 431-34, figs. 262, 264, 270, 272, 275, pl. X-XI; 1930: pl. XXII; Militello 1998: 107-115, pl. 5/6; Evans 1928: 1, 109-112, figs. 49, 51-54; Marinatos 1968: 12, pl. B: 1; s. Doumas 1996: 120, figs. 85-86; Marinatos 1970: 20-21, 49-53, pl. A-C; Doumas 2005: fig. 7; Xeste 3, Room 3a: Doumas 1996: 152, fig. 116; Morgan 1988: pl. C.
- 14 Parallels: examples of wall painting: Evans 1921: 542-544, figs. 394-395, 1930: 375-378, figs. 251-252; Militello 1998: 151, pl. 11B, 13; Morgan 1988: 60, colourpl. C; Coleman 1973: 293-294, fig. 2, pl. 56b; Hirsch 1972: G 11, fig. 20, G 20, fig. 27b, G 23, G 24, fig. 27a; Ιακωβίδης 1998: 79-84, pl. VIb, VIIa-b, VIIIa, IX; offering tables: Doumas 1996: 182, figs. 142-144; Marinatos 1970: pl. 82; pottery: Marinatos 1968: pl. 11: 2, colourpl. C; 1972: pl. 80, 81, colourpl. 11; 1970: 67b; 1971: pl. 49, 54; Catling 1978/1979: 34, fig. 44; Marinatos 1971: pl. 49; Catling 1981/1982: 47, pl. 102.
- 15 Parallels: examples of wall painting: Militello 1998: 107-115, pl. 5, 6; Evans 1928: 1, 109-116, figs. 49, 51-54, 501, fig. 305; Atkinson *et al.* 1904: 70/71, pl. III; example of offering tables: Doumas 1996: 182, figs. 142-144; example of steatite vessel: Evans 1928: 504, figs. 307-308; example of gold vessel: Matthäus 1980: 25-26, 30-31, figs. 3f, 213.

technical particularities might be considered as rooted in the Aegean.¹⁶

Nevertheless, basic differences have been noted that rule out a simple one-to-one transfer of the elements. These probably local peculiarities can be traced well in the small-scale landscapes of the western wall. The date palms with their blue fronds and crooked, wavy contoured trunks are consistent with Aegean examples in wall paintings (figure 5)¹⁷ and in other genera like pottery or seals.¹⁸ The same holds true for the fan-like arrangement of the three trees, a feature well known in the Palace Style amphorae of the Greek mainland (figure 6)¹⁹ and from a seal impression from Pylos.²⁰ There is, however, no comparison in the Aegean for the ripe

16 Brysbaert 2008: 4.

17 E.g. Doumas 2006: 100-101, pl. 61a; Lang 1969: pl. H, 11 N nws.

18 Examples of pottery: Pernier 1935: pl. 20a, 31; Levi 1976: pl. 72a, 76h, 104b; Boulotis 2005: 56, figs. 37-38; Marinatos 1968: 38, fig. 23; 1973: pl. 44a; Seager 1910: 25, fig. 8; Mackenzie 1903: 193-194, fig. 10A; Niemeier 1985: Cat.-No. II A 1, pl. 3; Kalogeropoulos 1998: 130, Kakovatos 14, pl. 39c-d, 118, Dendra 1, pl. 40a, 122, Asine 2, pl. 39a-b, 15, Analipsis, Cat.-No. 39, pl. 17a-b, 122-123, Asine 3, pl. 25a, 121, Argos 3, pl. 25b, 135, Kakovatos 21, pl. 25d; Blegen – Rawson 1973: fig. 249.26.D; example of seal impressions: CMS I: 375.

19 Kalogeropoulos 1998: 169-170, especially fn. 924; in particular the amphora from Kakovatos, s. *ibid.*: 130, Kakovatos 14, pl. 39c-d; but as well in the version with five trees from Dendra, *ibid.*: 118, Dendra 1, pl. 40a; or with more rigid palm trees s. *ibid.*: 122, Asine 2, pl. 39a-b, 15, Analipsis, Cat.-No. 39, pl. 17a-b, 122-123, Asine 3, pl. 25a, 121, Argos 3, pl. 25b, 135, Kakovatos 21, pl. 25d; see the same arrangement on a rhyton of the Late Helladic IIA-phase in Pylos, Blegen – Rawson 1973: fig. 249.26.D.

20 CMS I: 375.

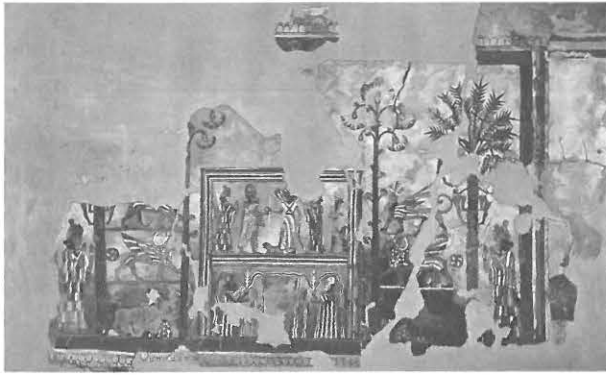


Figure 7: Investiture Scene at Mari (Parrot 1958: pl. A).

dates hanging down from the trees.²¹ This is rather a usual pictorial convention from the Near East,²² as is indicated by the well-known wall paintings from Mari (figure 7).²³

Also, the rock formations in the pictorial scenes exhibit the customary undulating contours typical for the Aegean iconography.²⁴ In the case of the 'Saffron Gatherers' of Xeste 3 (figure 8)²⁵ and the *Miniature-fresco* of the West-House²⁶ from Thera, the rocks are even confined by a thick grey outline, well comparable with the grey contour lines of the small scale scenes from Qatna. However, there is an elementary difference in the relation of the grasses to the rocks. In the Aegean, grass or plants are usually arranged on the contour line. In a few cases, the outline of the rock formations can also be cut by plants, such as in the paintings of Agia Triada,²⁷ but they are usually not tightly enclosed by the contours. Though, in the right-field image of the miniature landscapes of Qatna, the undulating outline seems to frame properly a tuft of grass. The question raised here is whether we are dealing with a different understanding of the motif in this case. While the representation in the Aegean appears to be a cut through the rock, one could get the impression that in western Syria the undulating contours were also used as a frame for plants. This would explain why the interior of the rocks of the left miniature landscape is filled by rather unorganized, ragged red and black



Figure 8: Detail of the fresco of the *Saffron Gatherers*, Xeste 3 (Doulas 1996: fig. 116).

lines, hardly identifiable with the carefully depicted veining of rocks known from the Aegean examples.²⁸

On the southern wall, the rolling ground of the seascape is uncommon for the Bronze Age iconography in Syria.²⁹ Especially noteworthy is the framing of the fish tail (figure 9) and the dolphin (Plate 2) with a red background. Both characteristics are foreign to the western Syrian/Lebanese area, while such representations, both above³⁰ and below water,³¹ are widespread in the Aegean. A very close parallel is the representation of dolphins embraced by softly undulating red ground on a pithos from Thera.³²

The pointy protrusions at the sea ground of the Qatna seascape (Plate 1b, left section) can be interpreted as an approach to the Aegean coral motifs with

21 See also the discussion in Morgan 1988: 24-29.

22 E.g. seal from the Akkad period, Amiet 1977: fig. 772.

23 Parrot 1958: 53-66, pl. VII, IX, XII, A; s. also for Egypt Deir el-Bahari: Naville 1893: pl. 69, 74, 78, 79.

24 See. fn 13.

25 Xeste 3, Room 3a: Doulas 1996: 152, fig. 116.

26 Morgan 1988: pl. C.

27 For example the *Affresco del Gatto* from Agia Triada (Militello 1998: 107-115, fig. 28/29, pl. G). Here the plant cuts a rockwork, but nonetheless it grows from the outline of another rock. In a reconstruction of Pietro Militello a plant is furthermore depicted below the outlines of the landscape, but not framed by it. But in this case it is hard to clarify if this simply is because of the so-called reverse landscape.

28 E.g. Xeste 3, Room 3: Doulas 1996: 152, fig. 116; Morgan 1988: pl. C; Militello 1998: 107-115, fig. 28/29, pl. G; Evans 1928: 1, 109-112, figs. 49, 51-54.

29 See Mirko Novák and Peter Pfälzner in a preliminary report, Novák – Pfälzner 2001: 183.

30 Examples for a simple wavelike underground: Doulas 1996: 36-37, figs. 2-5, 64-67, figs. 30-34, 120, figs. 85-86; bordering of the figures by the landscape: Doulas 1996: Thera: 116, 117, figs. 82-83; Marinatos 1970: 28-32, 46-47, pl. D-E, 51-61, 117-120; Crete: Militello 1998: 107-115, pl. 5-6; Evans 1928: 1, 109-116, figs. 49, 51-54, 2, 724, fig. 451.

31 Evans 1928: 501, fig. 305; Atkinson *et al.* 1904: 70/71, pl. III; pottery: Catling 1981/1982: 47, pl. 102; Boulotis 2005: 50, fig. 31; examples of the Marine Style: Mountjoy 1974; 1984; examples of the Palace Style: Amphora from Knossos, North-West-Treasury House: Mackenzie 1903: 193-194, fig. 10A; Niemeier 1985: Cat.-No. I A 2 – I A 5, pl. 1: 9, 2, 2: 3; Kalogeropoulos 1998: 123, Asine 4, pl. 44a; other genera: Doulas 1996: 182, figs. 142-144; Evans 1928: 504, figs. 307-308; Matthäus 1980: 25-26, 30-31, figs. 3f, 213; Papadopoulos 1998: Cat.-no. 31, colourpl. A, pl. 4, 31; CMS II: 8, no. 157.

32 Von Rűden 2011: 72-74, pl. 50d.



Figure 9: Fish tail of the southern wall framed by the red background (photo: Günther Mirsch; Qatna Project, University of Tübingen).



Figure 10: Vessel from Phylakopi (Mountjoy 1999: 897, fig. 17).

sea feathers (figure 10).³³ Even here the implementation in Qatna only seems to be related to the Aegean motifs: the absent colour displacement of the motif from the sea ground is only used in the Aegean in monochrome vessel paintings and the peculiar horn-like projections look more like a modification of the original Aegean coral/sea feather motif. The dolphin is well known as a motif in Aegean iconography,³⁴ but this example is also differentiated in respect to its colour composition (Plate 2). In the Aegean one finds mostly blue or grey dolphins, also with coloured flanks.³⁵ A more unnatural brown or red-brown dolphin seems to be more of a Syrian peculiarity. In summary, several motifs and stylistical elements with an obvious Aegean origin have been taken on; yet they appear to primarily adapt, but never completely follow, the prevailing Aegean conventions.

In spite of the execution of the paintings from Qatna in fresco, there are also some notable differences on the technical level. For example, a parallel to the technique used to anchor the lime plaster onto the clay-based substrate can be principally found in the Middle Bronze Age paintings in the palace at Tell Sakka (figure 11),³⁶ whose iconography exhibits mostly Near Eastern or Egyptian elements.³⁷ An interpretation as local handiwork therefore seems quite likely. However, the extremely rare use of string impressions (see figure 3) and the absence of compass markings and other scorings raise questions. In the case of the spirals from the left section of the western wall (Plate 1a) it is noteworthy that especially these round decoration pat-

terns in the Aegean often have a puncture mark from a compass at their centre.³⁸ Also, they were partly prepared by scoring³⁹ or at least fixing their positions on the wall using string impressions.⁴⁰ Similarly, the use of black contour lines seems to be slightly different. At Qatna they are drawn before the extensive colour application (figure 12). In addition to their function as simple outlines, they are additionally used as orientation guides for the following work flow; whereas in the Aegean they are usually applied afterwards, in order to better define the motif for the eye of the beholder.⁴¹ Furthermore, the extremely intensive burnishing along the motifs at Qatna (see figure 4) is at least uncommon for the Aegean, where the surface is usually burnished evenly.⁴²

The references of the Qatna wall paintings to those in the Aegean are not a singular case in the Near East: similar influences can also be seen in the wall paintings from Alalakh⁴³ in present day Turkey, from Tell Kabri⁴⁴ in Palestine, Tell el-Dab'a⁴⁵ in the Nile Delta and, in any circumstance, also in Hattusa.⁴⁶ The reason for the appearance of frescos in the Near East is thought to come from the spread of Minoan craftsmen. This proposal is also suggested by Bronze Age texts,

33 Mountjoy 1999: 897, fig. 17; Niemeier 1985: 39-40, fig. 12; Mountjoy 1974; 1984; von Rüden 2011: 72-74, pl. 50d.

34 See. fn 14.

35 Compare fn. 14 above.

36 Ahmad Taraqji: personal communication.

37 Taraqji 1999: 27-43.

38 E.g. Lang 1969: 11, Cat.-No. 14 F 45; Cameron unpubl.: 281, pl. 155B; Asimenos 1978: 576, pl. 3.

39 Cameron unpubl.: 281, pl. 138A-B.

40 Lang 1969: 11, Cat.-No. 14 F 45.

41 Cameron unpubl.: 285.

42 Shaw – Shaw 2006: 200; Cameron unpubl: fig. 40 (in one example Cameron observed that a central filling motif of a spiral from Knossos was slightly sunken in the surface, s. Cameron 1970: 162, 167, frag. 82, pl. 13).

43 Woolley 1955: 228-235; Niemeier 1991; Niemeier – Niemeier 1998.

44 Niemeier 1991; Niemeier – Niemeier 1998; 2002: 254-299.

45 Bietak 1994a, 1994b; 1995; 1996; Bietak – Marinatos 1995; Bietak – Marinatos – Palyvou 2000.

46 Neve 1993: fig. 75.

which document diverse specialists such as doctors, master builders or sculptors sent between the oriental palaces.⁴⁷ But do we have to assume such a form of direct agency for the Qatna wall paintings, or is it possible that other paths of interpretation might prove more plausible?

The differences described above that pertain to the technical execution and composition speak against an interpretation of the wall paintings as pure 'Aegean' craftsmanship and more for a local production that came about through a series of motif adaptations and transfer of the fresco technique. In my view, the different motifs, stylistic and technical characteristics must have been transferred in the context of an extensive and complex communication process enduring for a longer time span between the two regions, which finally gained a foothold in the local production.

How should such a process be presented and what motifs did a Syrian ruler have to draw upon such iconography for the frescos to furnish his palace? What local meaning did these assumedly exotic looking paintings have? Obviously they had found a place in the Syrian material culture, but in what way were they perceived there? The still unclear function of Room N in the palace does not provide any other clues as to their meaning, which is why an explanation to this problem must be sought from a wider regional context. In the last phase of this investigation, the paintings should be placed in the context of Aegean imports and influences in Syria, and in this way their meaning might be approximated.

An obvious idea would be to assume a connection between the wall paintings of Qatna and the group of luxury goods of the so-called *international koiné*, whose main characteristic is a hybridity of different eastern Mediterranean motifs.⁴⁸ For the usually mobile goods of gold, silver, ivory or textiles Marian Feldman assumes a function in context with the greeting gifts (*šulmānu*) in the diplomatic interaction between rulers of the Late Bronze Age. Because of their prominence these mobile prestige goods might have been the source of inspiration for the wall paintings in Qatna. But following Feldman's definition, the iconography of these goods must have possessed a complete hybridity to fulfil their role.⁴⁹ Nonetheless this is not the case for the Qatna wall paintings: the Aegean motifs are rather obvious, as is indicated by the cited examples, whereas influences from other regions are more than marginal. The explicit references to the Aegean are, in my point of view a deliberate quote from the material culture of the Aegean and must therefore be interpreted primarily as a form of interaction between these two regions.



Figure 11: Clay-based substrate on a Middle Bronze Age wall at Tell Sakka (author's photo).⁵⁰

Aegean imports and influences were already present by the Middle Bronze Age in the northern Levant and Syria. However, at that time in the northern Levant, these were more likely isolated imports⁵¹ whose interpretation is made difficult due to often unclear find contexts.⁵² Direct contact between the two regions has been supported by a text from the archive from Mari, in which a man from Kaptor is named as the recipient of tin at the port city of Ugarit.⁵³ It is possible that through this type of palatial exchange, the few early imports were brought to Syria. Another clue comes from a listing of metal vessels with the designation of origin "from Crete" (*kaptarîtu*) from the same archive.⁵⁴ Independent from the question whether these objects are actual Cretan imports or made in a Cretan manner,⁵⁵ the texts imply that they were sent to Mesopotamia as part of a royal gift exchange and therefore were prestige goods.⁵⁶ Thus, not only did they serve as communication between royal houses, but also established and consolidated the hierarchy within each of their local societies.⁵⁷

Somewhat later, in addition to the many Egyptian motifs, Aegean ones were also being introduced into the Syrian glyptics. Dominique Collon discerned a connection between some of the cylinder seals of

47 Zaccagnini 1983: e.g. KBo 1 10+ Rs. 58-61; see Hagenbuchner 1989: 294 (text 204); Lackenbacher 1995: 77-83; KUB 3 67 Vs. 3'-6'; Edel 1994: 170-171.

48 See Feldman 2006: 25-29.

49 Ibid.: 30.

50 I would like to thank Ahmad Taraqqi for the generous permission to publish this photograph.

51 Smith 1965: 13, fig. 20c/d; Melas 1988: 47-70; Dunand 1937-1959: Vol. 1, 77, 191; Schaeffer 1939: 279-280; Walberg 1981: 14; Buchholz 1974: 398-399, 437.

52 For a more detailed discussion of this problem see von Rüden in print.

53 Guichard regards the phrase "man from kaptara" as more than an ethnic appellation. In fact, for him this expression stands for a prince or ruler from Crete: Guichard 2005: 162, n. 8.

54 Dossin 1939: 111-112; Guichard 2005: 208/209; Bry 2005: 105.

55 Guichard 2005: 163, 165/166, 171/172, 208/209.

56 E.g. a gold vessel sent to Hammurabi: see Guichard 2005: 208.

57 Cf. Wilmsen 1972: 1-2.

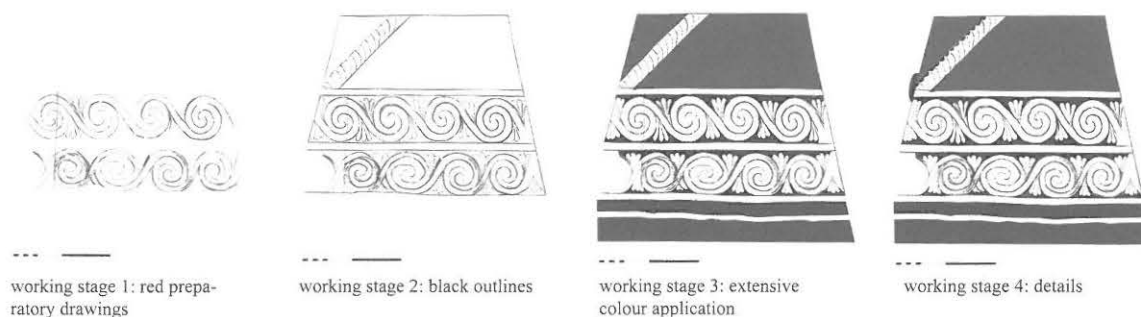


Figure 12: Working stages for the colour application of the Double Spiral Band (author's drawing).

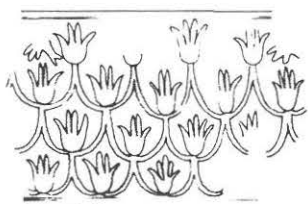


Figure 13: Seal from Alalakh VII (Collon 1975: No. 164).

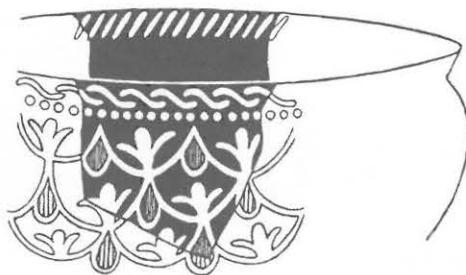


Figure 14: Minoan Cup of Kamares type from Ugarit (Collon 2000: fig. 15).

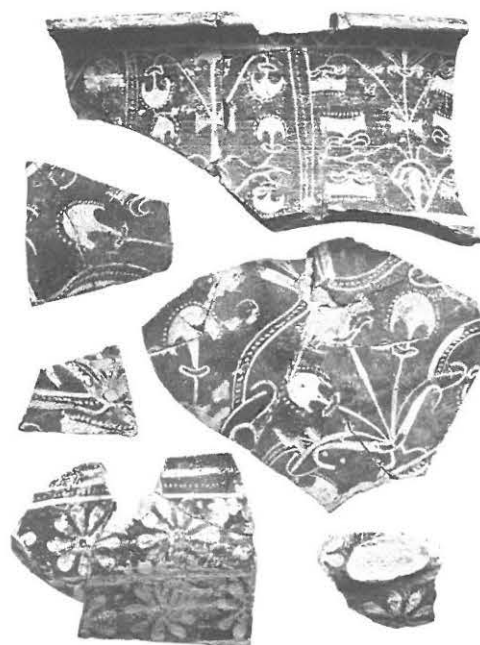


Figure 15: Tell Atchana Ware (Evans 1936: pl. VI).

Alalakh (figure 13) and a floral motif from the Cretan Kamares Ware (figure 14)⁵⁸ that dates at least 100 years earlier. This motif appears not only on seals from Alalakh but also on those from Carchemish and Ugarit.⁵⁹ It seems to be a type of archaism, which is also found on the much later Tell Atchana Ware from the Late Bronze Age.⁶⁰ The decoration for these beakers alludes to much older Cretan ceramic motifs (figure 15)⁶¹ and, like the seals, they can be considered as possible 'elite markers'.⁶²

⁵⁸ For an example see: Levi 1976: pl. XLVIIc.

⁵⁹ Alalakh: Collon 2000: 291, fig. 15, 293; 1975: no. 164; Carchemish: Collon 1987: no. 223; Ugarit: Amiet 1992: no. 440-442. The so-called flying gallop can also be seen as another new Aegean motif on the Middle Bronze Age seals: Collon 1975: no. 111 and 122; 2000: fig. 1a-c.

⁶⁰ Woolley 1955: 319, 350.

⁶¹ Evans 1936: 133; Cecchini 1965: 40-41, 46-47.

⁶² Akkermans – Schwartz 2003: 332.

The reception of the Aegean motifs in the personal representation medium of the palatial elite is a witness to the high regard for these motifs. It seems that the palace's elite found the Cretan goods, which were sent some hundred years before as a part of the royal gift exchange, as so valuable that they considered it worthwhile to draw on this decoration for their seals. Obviously the prestige value of the Cretan objects within the royal gift exchange seemed to be also translated to the Cretan decoration schemata and influences, and was used as a symbol of elevated societal status around 1600 BC.

At about the same time as the appearance of the numerous Aegean motifs, the very complex fresco technique⁶³ also appeared at the palace of Alalakh.

⁶³ See the statement about the complex workflow for this craft, Brysbaert unpubl: 203-205.

lakh VII⁶⁴ and thus forms a *terminus ante quem* for this transmission of technical aspects. This points to a close contact with the Aegean – either in the form of itinerate craftsmen or through contact between people who were experienced in these workflows. In this manner, already at this early phase, the technique had the opportunity to enter into the Syrian material culture.

A passage from the Ba'al myth⁶⁵ can be used as a reflection for the local acceptance of Crete and Cretan influence. Although the content of the text is mythological, the relationship of the god Kothar-wa-Hussus to Crete is not without meaning for the people's perception of the Aegean at that time. The construction of the Ba'al Palace by this god, who has been called upon all the way from Crete, reflected in the local religion the adaption and acceptance of Aegean goods and influences by the Syrian elite. Whereas the gods let their palace be built by Kothar-wa-Hussus, the Syrian elite used Aegean motifs to consolidate their own status.

The use of Aegean motifs and techniques for the wall paintings from Qatna are not only to be understood as part of the Late Bronze Age supraregional communication, but must also be seen as an integral part of a development that started in the Middle Bronze Age. Aegean goods and influences were already established in Syria since the Middle Bronze Age as a symbol for people with an elevated social status. Likewise, the fresco technique also became known at this time and can only be interpreted as the result of direct contact between the palaces of both regions. Afterwards, both the motifs and the technique could have found a foothold in the material culture, reflected in the mobile luxury goods as well as in the fixed installed paintings from Qatna. In spite of their localness, their Aegean connotation surely remained obvious and wanted for all. The king of Qatna thus chose an iconography that had been used since the Middle Bronze Age to express an elite status in Syria, and with it underlined his legitimization as ruler of the city state. In the end, whether or not Aegean craftsmen really participated in the production process may not have been of great importance for the local population of western Syria.

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64 Woolley 1955: 228–235.

65 Strange 1980: 83–85, no. 29; see as well a ritual text from Ugarit for the connection of Kothar-wa-Hussus with Crete, *RS 24.244*: 45–50 (verse IX).

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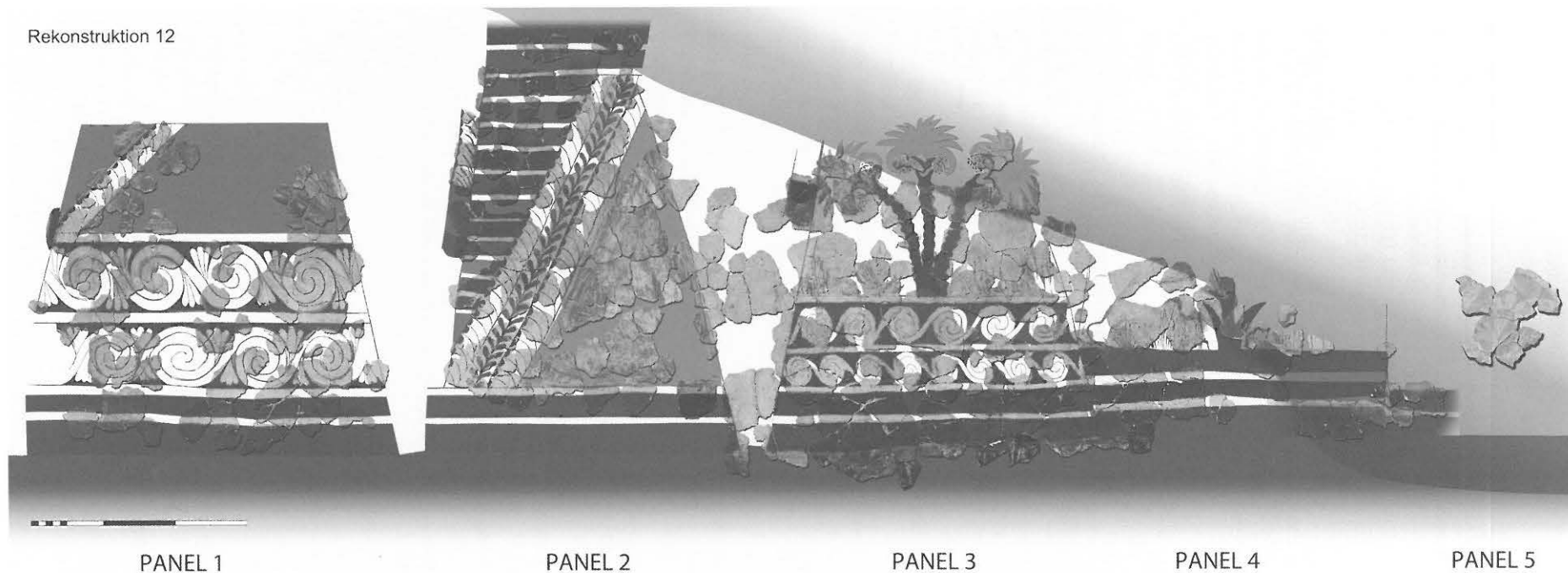
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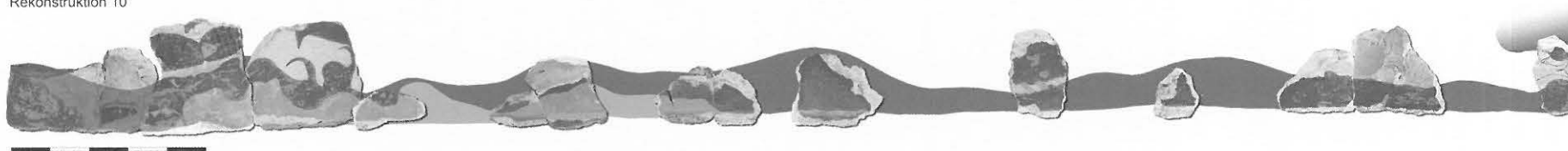
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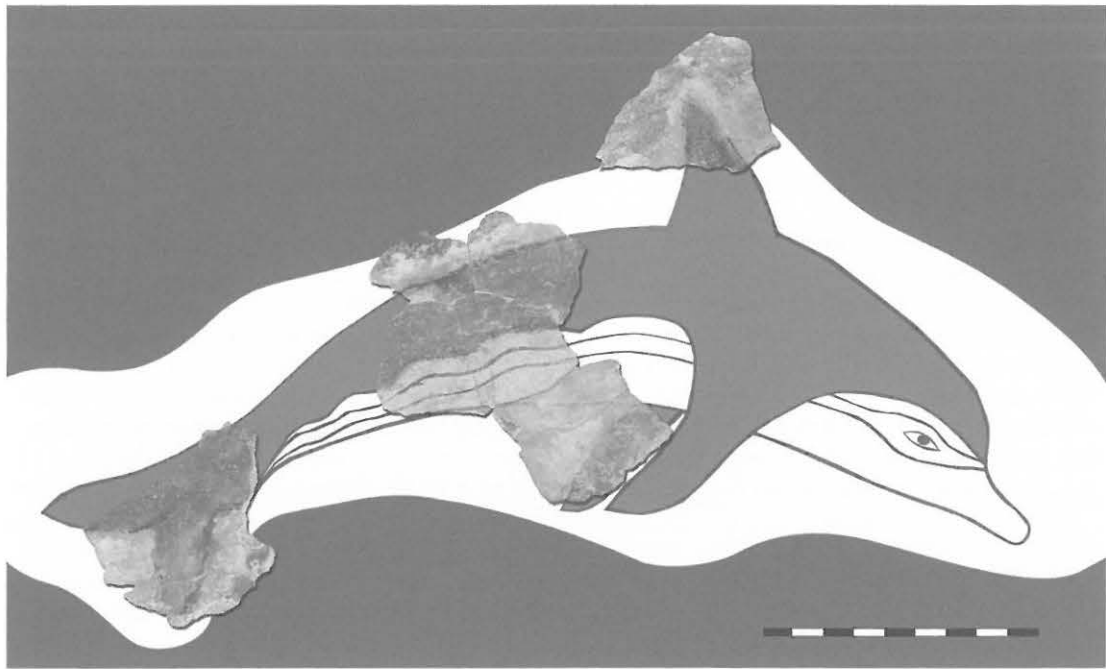


a: Reconstruction of the western wall of Room N, (C. von Rüden)

Rekonstruktion 10



b: Reconstruction of the southern wall of Room N (C. von Rüden).



Dolphin-reconstruction of the southern wall of Room N (C. von Rüden).